

Children of Venus

European Perceptions of Tahiti, 1767-1797

by

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Young hearts, which languished for some sunny isle,
Where summer years and summer women smile;
Men without country, who, too long estranged,
Had found no native home, or found it changed,
And, half uncivilised, preferred the cave
Of some soft savage to the uncertain wave--
The gushing fruits that nature gave untilled;
The wood without a path-- but where they willed;
The field o'er which promiscuous Plenty poured
Her horn; the equal land without a lord;

The wish-- which ages have not yet subdued
In man-- to have no master save his mood
The earth, whose mine was on its face, unsold,
The glowing sun and produce all its gold;
The Freedom which can call each grot a home;
The general garden, where all steps may roam,
Where Nature owns a nation as her child,
Exulting in the enjoyment of the wild;
Their shells, their fruits, the only wealth they know,
Their unexploring navy, the canoe;
Their sport, the dashing breakers and the chase;
Their strangest sight, an European face
Such was the country which these strangers yearned
To see again-- a sight they dearly earned

- From Lord Byron's *The Island* (1823)

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A note on quotations

This thesis contains an extensive amount of quotations from 18th century travel journals. The authors of these journals used orthography and spelling that might seem strange or incorrect to modern readers. To avoid the risk of altering the original meaning of the quotations, I have chosen not to update them with modern spelling, except in those rare circumstances where the original author has made an obvious error of misspelling.

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1. Introduction

Introduction of subject and thesis

By 1767 few places in the world had not felt the impact of Europeans in some way. A Western-led global economy had existed for long, and British colonisation and imperialism were well under way, particularly notable were the colonies in North America, the sugar colonies of the Caribbean and the beginnings of British rule in India. Still, the Age of Discovery was not entirely over. The eighteenth century gave birth to several great explorers, most notably James Cook. The voyages of exploration undertaken by Cook and others in this period were fuelled more by scientific curiosity and a sense of adventure than imperialist expansionism.¹ There was still an unknown world out there, or more precisely “down there”. *Terra Australis* was the name given to the great southern continent many scientists believed to exist and many explorers hoped to find.²

As the Pacific ocean was increasingly explored and chartered, a “Pacific craze”³ swept through Europe, particularly caused by an island initially mispronounced as “Otaheite”⁴, today known as Tahiti, one of the Society Islands in Polynesia. Even today, the name of the island evokes images of something beautiful and exotic, perhaps even sinful. But where do such unclear and ambiguous perceptions come from? The 18th century produced a plethora of travel journals and narratives from all over the world, including Tahiti, and it is clear that something about what was reported by the early visitors to Tahiti ignited a spark in the imagination of the European public. Usually these reports are described as containing tales of promiscuous women greeting sailors and offering them sensual pleasures, on an island where the population lived as children of nature, happy and at peace.⁵ These images are said to fit into a larger picture of European romanticism and the relationship between Western and Non-Western peoples during the Enlightenment, including the belief in “the noble savage” – a term supposedly coined by Rousseau.⁶

¹ P.J. Marshall & Glyndwr Williams, *The Great Map of Mankind. British Perceptions of the World in the Age of Enlightenment* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1982), pp. 258-259.

² Marshall, p. 259.

³ Marshall, p. 258.

⁴ The “o” referred to the Tahitian word for “it is” which could lead to misunderstandings, such as “it is Tahiti” becoming “O-Tahiti” and “it is Mai” becoming “Omai” (the name of the first Tahitian to visit England).

⁵ A recent work presenting this view is Trevor Lummis, *Pacific Paradises. The Discovery of Tahiti and Hawaii* (Phoenix Mill: Sutton Publishing Ltd, 2005).

⁶ Ter Ellingson, *The Myth of the Noble Savage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), pp. xiii-xiv.

It is hard to avoid using vague words and expressions like “supposedly” and “claimed” when describing these intellectual currents. The reason lies in the fact that much of what has been written about 18th century exploration and culture meetings contains these often superficial assessments of how Europeans viewed non-Europeans, particularly regarding Tahiti’s role in this general image.

This project was initiated by my personal fascination with cross-cultural meetings, particularly those which occurred for the first time in history. As the Western nations expanded both their power and their areas of interest, countless meetings between Europeans and indigenous peoples occurred around the world. I chose Tahiti as the island seemed to have had an impact on a romantic current in the European history of ideas, out of all proportion to the island’s size, but I could not put my finger on exactly why. Thus my initial goal was to penetrate the vague assessments claiming that the Europeans saw Tahiti as a paradise on earth, and to clarify what exactly that meant.

I also had a preconceived notion that Tahiti had served as one of the prime examples of being the home of what Rousseau had termed “The Noble Savage”, a kind of wild primitive living in a state of nature, but happier and “nobler” than the average civilized European. However, our preconceived notions are often wrong, which makes thorough scholarly research even more necessary. As Ter Ellingson convincingly argues in *The Myth of the Noble Savage* (2001), the “Noble savage” is a fake concept. It was created in the 19th century for political reasons⁷, more specifically in 1859 by John Crawford – the coming president of the Ethnological Society of London – “as part of a racist coup within the society (...) framed as part of a program of ideological support for an attack on anthropological advocacy of human rights”⁸ and has been attributed specifically to Rousseau, and in general to the most romantic of the 18th century enlightened philosophers.⁹ Crawford had a social darwinist agenda, and by deliberately misquoting Rousseau and others he invented the concept to demonstrate the failure and foolishness of those who idealised primitive societies.¹⁰

⁷ Ellingson does not deny that the words “noble” and “savage” were occasionally used in connection with each other before, during and after Rousseau’s lifetime, from the french lawyer and ethnographer Marc Lescarbot in 1609 to Walter Scott’s 1818 novel *The Heart of Midlothian*. However, these occurrences carry different meanings than what the 19th century version claims to project.

⁸ Ellingson, p. xv.

⁹ Ellingson, pp. xiii – xviii.

¹⁰ Ellingson, pp. 291-197.

This false notion is still at work today; looking up “noble savage” in today’s dictionaries and encyclopedias will tell you that.¹¹

But is it of any consequence that this concept was invented in the 19th and not the 16th, 17th or 18th century? Is this not merely “empty formalism”, as Ellingson himself asks?¹² No, because the reality behind the myth might also have been distorted. According to Ellingson, there did not exist a belief in anything resembling “noble savages” during the 18th century, thus his critique of the noble savage concept as a “scholarly hoax”¹³ extends beyond the construction of the concept in itself and points at the fact that it has been accepted as conveying a truth about European perceptions of non-Europeans.

Ellingson’s agenda is to abolish the false noble savage concept from the field of anthropology forever. My agenda in this thesis will be to follow up on Ellingson’s claim that the reality behind the myth might have been distorted. By examining historical sources I hope to reveal whether European voyagers did bring with them a belief in noble savages to Tahiti or not. In the process I will endeavour to identify what the early visitors to Tahiti emphasized in their journals, and see if these common themes can in any way fit into the noble savage myth. Whether the Europeans believed in “noble savages” or not, I will try to make clear that they certainly did bring with them preconceived ideas and notions that heavily influenced what they reported back from Tahiti.

Noble savage concept

To analyze European perceptions of Tahiti in light of the noble savage myth we need to have a rather clear picture of what the myth is said to contain. That is not necessarily an easy task; after all we are dealing with a dubious concept that was created, but not clearly defined, quite some time *after* the era when it was supposedly part of European thought.¹⁴ Another challenging problem is that the term has been used haphazardly in the past, and still is today. Michael Alexander’s *Omai – Noble Savage* (1977) tells the story of the first Tahitian visitor to England. But why does Alexander add the secondary title *Noble Savage*? What made Omai a noble savage or why has he been portrayed as a noble savage? The book does not say. A more

¹¹ As of April 9th, 2007, the Wikipedia article on “Noble savage” reads: “In the 18th century culture of “Primitivism” the noble savage, uncorrupted by the influences of civilization, was considered more worthy, more authentically noble than the contemporary product of civilized training.”
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noble_savage

¹² Ellingson, p. 6

¹³ Ellingson, p. xiv.

¹⁴ Ellingson, pp. xiii-xiv.

recent example can be found in Roy Porter's *Enlightenment* (2000), where Porter describes the idealization of primitive peoples in the British enlightenment and how it "fuelled the cult of the noble savage".¹⁵ The reader is not offered any explanation of what "noble savage" actually means or why it supposedly had a cult surrounding it.

The words in themselves are also highly problematic; how can someone be both noble and a savage? Also, the words can not immediately be connected to their purported content. The noble savage concept is often summed up as describing native peoples as "children of nature", or as Ellingson defines it "a mythic personification of natural goodness by a romantic glorification of savage life".¹⁶ This is probably the closest we will get to a clear definition of the term. However, throughout the thesis I will look for other ideas and perceptions that might correlate with the noble savage myth.

"Romanticists" and "sceptics"

As I will try to make clear in this thesis, it is possible to roughly identify two types of visitors to Tahiti in the early period who I will refer to as the "romanticists" and the "sceptics". The romanticists clearly expressed a glorifying view of Tahiti and a longing to discover something different from Europe. Note that by "romanticism" I do not refer to the artistic movement of the 19th century, but to a general desire to portray Tahiti (or other peoples and places) in harmonious and idealistic terms. Such an outlook was shared by many of the explorers, although they did not see themselves as belonging in any way to a specific movement called "romanticism". Still, the artistic and intellectual currents that would eventually be named "romanticism" were influenced by the travel reports from exotic places, including Tahiti.¹⁷ Thus the romanticists of this thesis can be seen as inspirators for the romantic writers, painters and poets of the 19th century.

The "sceptics" on the other hand, usually outnumbered by the romanticists on the voyages, were not easily impressed by what they witnessed and often compared the "savages" of Tahiti to civilized Europeans, with the intention to illustrate the inferiority of the islanders. These evolutionistic opinions can easily be seen as precursors to the racial theory of the 19th century that set out to prove the superiority of some human "races" over others.

¹⁵ Roy Porter, *Enlightenment. Britain and the Creation of the Modern World* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), p. 358.

¹⁶ Ellingson, p. 1.

¹⁷ Tim Fulford, Debbie Lee & Peter J. Kitson (eds.), *Literature, Science and Exploration in the Romantic Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 6.

I have created this rough distinction between the two groups for my own convenience and not because every visitor to Tahiti could be easily placed in one or the other. In fact, individuals would sometimes project opinions in their journals that would shift back and forth from a romantic view to a sceptic view. Certain individuals, for example James Cook, would do their best to take the middle ground and not let themselves be caught up in neither romantic daydreaming nor ethnocentric ridicule. However, as I will try to make clear, the distinction is not entirely arbitrary; it is certainly possible to identify two sets of opinions about Tahiti in the early period.

I will not elaborate further on the characteristics of the two groups here. After all, to identify the various opinions and perceptions among the European navigators is one of the main points of this thesis, and I will present the most common themes found in the journals in separate chapters.

Previous research

To my knowledge there exist no *thorough* analyses of European perceptions of Tahitians in the early period, but the subject is mentioned and discussed in several studies on 18th century exploration, enlightenment ideas and Pacific anthropology. Alexander H. Bolyanatz's *Pacific Romanticism* (2004) approaches the subject directly, however with a different mission and outlook than myself. Bolyanatz argues that the romanticising of Tahiti was part of a general Western romantic attitude to non-western peoples that is still at work today. This romanticism, Bolyanatz rightly argues, is a hindrance to understanding between people and cultures. The British constructed their own image of Tahiti which was not corresponding with actual Tahitian society. But Bolyanatz goes too far; his conclusion seems to be that there have existed *no* actual differences between the Tahitian and British world views, or between *any* two cultures at any time or place for that matter.

Trevor Lummis – a non-professional scholar using some of the same source material as myself – reaches quite different conclusions than Bolyanatz, in his *Pacific Paradises* (2005). In his opinion, the British certainly found something quite different at Tahiti which stirred their imaginations. Sadly, they managed (in cooperation with other Europeans) to destroy most of the authentic Tahitian culture, and what remains today is a tourist travesty, according to Lummis.

P.J. Marshall and Glyndwr Williams put forward a more global perspective in their analysis of British Enlightenment images of the world in *The Great Map of Mankind* (1982). The last chapter concerns the exploration of the Pacific, with an emphasis on Tahiti. Marshall and Williams assert the importance of explorer journals in the shaping of the Tahitian image and the “Pacific Craze” that late 18th century Britain experienced. The death of Captain Cook at Hawaii in 1779 was according to the authors a severe blow to the idyllic image of the Pacific, but not a lethal one. The Romantic perceptions were still alive at the time of the mutiny on the *Bounty* 10 years later.

Tim Fulford, Debbie Lee and Peter J. Kitson’s *Literature, Science and Exploration in the Romantic Era* (2004) is an analysis of British exploration (including the discovery of Tahiti) in light of both Romantic literature and 18th century science. In one particularly interesting chapter the authors state the importance of the breadfruit (abundant at Tahiti) in creating the image of the Tahitian savage living in primitive affluence, an idyllic natural state of bliss only to be destroyed by the fatal impact of Western influence.

Art historian Bernard Smith has examined Pacific exploration and its influence on European art, science and ideas in two influential volumes; *European Vision and the South Pacific* (1985) and *Imagining the Pacific* (1992). Smith touched upon several subjects that extend beyond European perceptions of Tahiti. But in our context he offers an influential theory; that there existed two forms of primitivism in European attitudes to Pacific peoples: “a soft primitivism, applied mainly to the inhabitants of the Society Islands, and a hard primitivism, applied to such peoples as the Fuegians, the Maoris, and the Australian aborigines.”¹⁸ Soft primitivism included characteristics in accordance with the romantic school of thought; the primitives living in innocent harmony at one with nature, as opposed to the brutal and godless savages of the “hard primitivism”.¹⁹ According to Smith, the arrival of the missionaries to the Society Islands at the end of the 18th century marked the end of the “soft primitivism”- school of thought in the Society Islands. Spreading the word of the Christian God, the missionaries were much more condemning of the islanders than previous visitors.

What has been lacking in the mentioned works is a thorough account of what the European visitors to Tahiti reported in the years between Wallis’s expedition in 1767 and the

¹⁸ Bernard Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 5.

¹⁹ Donald Denoon, Stewart Firth, Jocelyn Linnekin, Malama Meleisea & Karen Nero (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Pacific Islanders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 12.

arrival of the missionaries in 1797. Neither has there been an attempt to view these perceptions and opinions in the context of the noble savage myth, claimed to play a crucial role in 18th century views of non-European peoples.

The sources: Methodological challenges and problems

The sources examined for this thesis are travel journals from various expeditions that visited Tahiti from Samuel Wallis' discovery in 1767 up to and including the arrival of the missionaries in the *Duff* in 1797. With one exception the journals examined were written in English by individuals – primarily officers and scientists – who visited Tahiti onboard British ships. The exception is Frenchman Louis Antoine de Bougainville's *A Voyage Round the World* (1772) which I have examined in its English translation. I have chosen to focus on the British journals as British navigators were without contest the most frequent visitors to Tahiti in the early period. I have made Bougainville the only exception to my rule as his account is considered to be of enormous importance to British perceptions of Tahiti.²⁰ There were also Spanish visitors at Tahiti, but I have left them out partly because of my limited grasp of the Spanish language, but most importantly because the Spanish expeditions seem to have had a very limited influence on British perceptions and opinions, compared to Bougainville.²¹

The majority of the journals I have examined were published not long after the authors had returned to their homeland and many have been republished up through the years. This has made the journals easily accessible and readable, and my research was easily conducted partly at the National Library in Oslo and partly at the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, London.

Some of the earliest journals were collected and published by the English writer John Hawkesworth, who never visited Tahiti. I have steered clear of these editions as comparisons with the original journals reveal that Hawkesworth edited and even rewrote the original journals to add extra dramatical or comical effect, at his own whim.

The nature and reliability of these sources may of course vary. For example; there is a difference between a journal written while the events described took place, compared to a scientific publication with remarks and descriptions written with the benefit of hindsight. Sometimes this distinction is clear, as with George Forster's *A Voyage Round the World*,

²⁰ Alexander H. Bolyanatz, *Pacific Romanticism. Tahiti and the European Imagination* (Westport: Praeger, 2004), p. 6.

²¹ Based on my own readings of the British sources.

which is an expressed attempt at presenting a scientific dissertation of the Pacific Islands. But in many cases it has been impossible to determine how much of the journal was actually written at Tahiti, how much was written later, by memory, and whether the journal has been edited or not. However, none of these concerns have been severe enough to ruin my project. All the journals, whenever and by whoever they were written, reveal perceptions and evaluations of the inhabitants of Tahiti, which is the true subject of this thesis. Had I set out to prove what *actually happened* and to evaluate the trustworthiness of the journals in accordance with how life at Tahiti actually was, the problems of precisely determining the correct dates and authors of the journals would have been significantly more dire, perhaps unsurmountable.

I have analyzed the sources with an effort to reveal mental constructs and perceptions that these explorers might have had in common. During my research I have of course looked at what the text is actually saying, but I have also tried to uncover possible hidden meanings or unspoken words. This means that I have not read the journals as merely remnants of a lost age or contributions to a certain discourse of the past. While examining the sources I have tried to capture what the author *actually* felt about Tahiti, whether he expressed it directly or not. I have attempted to force the sources to reveal something about the people behind them, not really about the people and places described *in* them.

Europeans at Tahiti, 1767-1797

Samuel Wallis, the English Captain, is considered the discoverer of Tahiti, arriving with *The Dolphin*, June 18th, 1767.²² Earlier European ships had most probably sighted the island, but Wallis and his crew were the first to go ashore and communicate with the natives.

This first meeting between Europeans and Tahitians was characterized by confusion and misunderstanding, followed by peaceful trade. Hostilities erupted when the Tahitians boarded the ship and started pulling the nails out of the ship's woodwork (iron was unknown on the island). The retribution from the Englishmen was hard, and a large number of natives was killed in the first days of contact. The Tahitians soon found trade to be a better tactic than war, and peaceful barter could ensue. And here the first sparks of the most lasting myth of Tahiti in the 18th century - that of Tahiti as a sexual paradise - was ignited, as the islanders

²² Events, names and dates in this chapter are in accordance with Raymond John Howgego, *Encyclopedia of Exploration to 1800* (Potts Point: Hordern House, 2003).

found a way to the English hearts; through the native women. Their sexual services were offered to the English crew, and iron nails were offered in return.

Less than a year later the French navigator Louis Anotoine de Bougainville visited the island. Unaware of Wallis' discovery he was met by friendly islanders who had learned from their last experience of cross-cultural contact. They immediately offered their women to the French crew and Bougainville eagerly noted down in his journal how he had discovered paradise on earth, an island he named "New Cythera"²³. Back in France he published his journal under the title *Voyage autour du monde* (A Voyage around the World), a book that would become essential for the image and perceptions of Tahiti among both the European public and later navigators.

The next one out was none other than James Cook, who would become one of the most famous explorers of all time. He visited Tahiti on three different voyages, the first in 1769 after being hired by the Royal Society, primarily to record the transit of Venus across the sun.²⁴ With him on the *The Endeavour* were naturalists Joseph Banks and Daniel Solander. Cook then returned on two occasions during his voyage with the *Resolution* and the *Adventure* in the years 1772-1775, again with scientists aboard who would later publish their journals, notably Johann Reinhold Forster, his son George Forster and the swede Anders Sparrman. Cook brought with him a Tahitian native named Omai back to England, at Omai's own request.

In the period 1772-1776 Spanish ships visited Tahiti, including a failed missionary expedition, but these are not subjects for examination in this thesis, as explained above.

Cook returned for the last time in 1777, ostensibly to return Omai to his countrymen, which was done successfully. After leaving Tahiti for the last time, Cook would meet his demise at Hawaii, being killed by natives there under circumstances that are still being discussed.

Tahiti's fame was elevated to new heights after the mutiny on the *Bounty* in 1789. The ship had completed a successful voyage - led by William Bligh - to collect breadfruit at Tahiti (which was supposed to be used to feed slaves in the Caribbean colonies). Shortly after leaving the island for the return voyage a mutiny erupted, Bligh was removed from the ship and set to sea in the *Bounty*'s launch together with some of his crewmembers. The mutineers - led by Fletcher Christian - tried to settle at the island of Tubuai but returned to Tahiti after conflicts with the Tubuai natives. Here some of the mutineers remained while Christian once

²³ Cythera - a greek island - was in greek mythology the island of Aphrodite, the Goddess of Love.

²⁴ Tahiti was seen as an ideal place to carry out such an observation.

again set sail with a crew of English men and Tahitian women. They would eventually settle at Pitcairn Island, where their ancestors still reside to this day.

After learning of the mutiny, the British Admiralty dispatched *HMS Pandora* to hunt down the mutineers. Under the command of Edward Edwards the ship reached Tahiti in March 1791, and after a few weeks 14 of the mutineers were arrested. The search for the *Bounty* itself proved unsuccessful, and eventually the *Pandora* ran aground and sank. In the end, 10 surviving mutineers were brought to London to face trial.

Later the same year, William Bligh – commanding the *Providence* - went on another breadfruit mission to Tahiti, this time with success.²⁵ Shortly after the island was visited by another navigator known to history, George Vancouver in the *Discovery*.

1797 signals our exit point, and was the year of the arrival of English missionaries. The *Duff*, carrying the Missionary Society (later renamed the London Missionary Society) signalled a new era in Tahitian-British relations. The Tahitians were confused by suddenly being visited by Europeans who did not drink and who did not seem to be interested in sexual relations with the islanders. Adding to the confusion, these Europeans were intent on spreading the word of the Christian god, which had not been emphasized by former visitors. After a difficult beginning, the missionaries eventually succeeded in converting King Pomare II²⁶ to Christianity and to initiate the era of a new religious hegemony at Tahiti, but those events exceed the limits of this thesis.

Non-European peoples in an Age of Enlightenment

The Age of Enlightenment signalled an increased faith in progress, reason and civilization in Europe. It was an intellectual movement full of complexities and contradictions, so I will not attempt to sum up all its common denominators here. However, regarding European views of non-European peoples, there are some factors that should be mentioned here, which will serve as a backdrop for the rest of the thesis.

It has been claimed that the philosophers of the Enlightenment shared a belief in *universalism*, the unity of humankind and that all peoples would follow the same route of

²⁵ In the end it was only a relative success. The plants were collected, but it turned out they were not well-suited for growth in Caribbean soil.

²⁶ Who had recently consolidated all of Tahiti under his rule.

progress.²⁷ This should be in the back of our minds as we look closer at European perceptions of Tahiti. Also, concepts such as *progress* as *civilization* could have consequences for how one looked at people living areas in the world where technology and education had not reached the same levels as in Europe. Tahiti was such a place; when Wallis arrived in 1767 the islanders were using stone tools, had seemingly no form of agriculture that could be compared to Europe and at first glance their religion seemed to consist of superstition and paganism. How did British navigators coming from well-educated homes react when they were faced with such “unevolved” peoples? That is one of the main focuses of this thesis.

Summary

Thus our mission should be fairly clear; to clarify European – primarily British – perceptions of Tahiti in the period 1767-1797, to identify the most common themes found in the journals of the visitors to Tahiti and in the process evaluate whether these perceptions were in accordance with what has been called “the noble savage myth”, a term that according to Ter Ellingson was established as a scholarly hoax in the 19th century, but that may or may not contain some truth as to how Europeans viewed non-European peoples in the 18th century.

I have organized my findings by creating separate chapters for the most common themes found in the European journals. This way I hope to present a rather clear picture of how the English navigators viewed the people of Tahiti and what issues they emphasized more than others.

²⁷ R.R. Palmer, Joel Colton, Lloyd Kramer, *A History of the Modern World* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002), p. 308.

2. The Kingdom of Venus: Sex, Beauty and Women

Perhaps the most enduring myth of Tahiti is that of the sexual paradise, conjuring images of half-naked women rushing out towards the incoming European ships to greet the tired seamen, offering them to partake in the uninhibited sensual pleasures of this Pacific paradise. Sex and beauty have been connected to the image of Tahiti since Samuel Wallis discovered the island in 1767. But how prevalent were these notions among the first travellers to Tahiti, and what exactly did these images consist of?

The central theme of this chapter is sex, beauty and the position of women in Tahitian society. 18th century England was a society where sex and eroticism was publicly debated and visible in a manner “historically atypical – perhaps bearing comparison with our own times”, according to Roy Porter.²⁸ In addition, British enlightenment philosophers were starting to view the concept of “beauty” as something psychological, emanating from the mind of the individual perceiver and not from the classical images of beauty.²⁹ Why then, did the Tahitian myth of free sex and otherworldly women gain such a foothold among the English navigators, who came from a nation where sex and beauty had reached a considerably modern stage? It certainly raises the question whether sex really was such a visible and talked about subject as Porter claims. This particularly concerns women; both their sexuality and their position in society. Even in an age of enlightenment the status of European women was clearly inferior to men, and gender and family relations were still seen “through the eyes of medieval realism rather than through those of nineteenth-century sentiment”.³⁰ This must be taken into account when one considers the encounters between English sailors and Tahitian women.

Another problematic aspect is the myth of Tahitian sexuality and beauty in the context of the noble savage myth. On the one hand we have the idea of the “child of nature” leading a more “noble” life than the European visitors. On the other hand we have the image of the Tahitian women as sinful nymphs offering their bodies to the seamen. Both these myths are said to have existed, but are they even compatible with each other? This issue has rarely been addressed, but we will do so in this chapter.

²⁸ Porter, p. 271.

²⁹ Porter, pp. 164-165.

³⁰ M. S. Anderson, *Europe in the Eighteenth Century. 1713-1789* (Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd., 2000), p. 21.

Origins

The origins of the image of Tahiti as a hedonist paradise is usually traced back to Louis-Antoine de Bougainville's short stay at the island in 1768, and his later published account. Bougainville had been unaware of the discovery made by Wallis and the *Dolphin* a few months earlier, when the English had been offered the services of young girls as an article of trade. According to George Robertson, the master of the *Dolphin*, "all the sailors swore they never saw handsomer made women in their lives, and declared they would all to a man, live on two thirds allowance, rather nor lose so fine an opportunity of getting a Girl a piece."³¹ However, Robertson's statement is nothing compared to the vivid descriptions of "New Cythera" put forth by Bougainville after being welcomed to the island by "pretty and almost naked women,"³² who were "for agreeable features (...) not inferior to most European women; and who in point of beauty of the body might, with much reason, vie them all."³³

The French were asked by the Tahitians to pick one woman each, and from this point on, Bougainville's account starts ascending towards the erotic climax that undoubtedly set its mark on the minds of future travellers to Tahiti. A typical example is the incident where a young woman entered the french ship:

"[She] carelessly dropt a cloth, which covered her, and appeared to the eyes of all beholders, such as Venus shewed herself to the Phrygian sheperd, having, indeed, the celestial form of that goddess. Both sailors and soldiers endeavoured to come to the hatch-way; and the captain was never hove with more alacrity than on this occasion."³⁴

Bougainville's account is ripe with these mythic and religious connotations and symbols, often connected to Greek mythology. On his own he created the image of Tahiti as the kingdom of Venus - the goddess of love - ruling a fantasy realm where sensual pleasures were valued more than anything else. A world where a European could easily – and forgivably – forget his enlightened morals and manners, as when the French were invited to a local party and once again were offered the services of the young girls, in full public display:

³¹ George Robertson, *The Discovery of Tahiti. A Journal of the Second Voyage of H.M.S. Dolphin Round the World, Under the Command of Captain Wallis, R.W. in the Years 1766, 1767 and 1768* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1948), p. 167.

³² Louis Antoine de Bougainville, *A Voyage Round the World. Performed by order of his most Christian majesty* (London, 1772), p. 216.

³³ Bougainville, p. 218.

³⁴ Bougainville, pp. 218-219.

“Here Venus is the goddess of hospitality, her worship does not admit of any mysteries, and every tribute paid to her is a feast for the whole nation. They were surprised at the confusion which our people appeared to be in, as our customs do not admit of such public proceedings. However, I would not answer for it, that every one of our men had found it impossible to conquer his repugnance, and conform to the customs of the country.”³⁵

Bougainville’s use of the word “repugnance” is interesting here, projecting a sense of shame of the Frenchmen’s inability to reject the hedonist primitives and trust their own enlightened upbringing and education.

The actual availability of sexual services became a much debated issue in the years after Bougainville’s visit (and still is today). One aspect to consider was the consent of the husbands of the young women. Were the men really willing to allow their wives to have sexual relations with complete strangers? According to Bougainville the consent of the husbands was indeed needed, the women would “wash with their blood any infidelity committed”³⁶ without it. However, this consent was usually not only taken for granted, it was also socially accepted and *expected* to the extent that “the husband is commonly the first who persuades his wife to yield to another.”³⁷ In such a state of affairs unmarried women would naturally be the most free-spirited of all; “everything invites her to follow the inclination of her heart, or the instinct of her sensuality; and public applause honours her defeat.” Once again, Bougainville chooses a negative word, *defeat*, in an otherwise positive and encouraging description. As will be argued throughout this thesis, Bougainville was not the only European absorbing the impressions of Tahiti with mixed emotions. Both the criticism and the praise of the Tahitian women can be seen as indicating that the English seamen were not prepared for what they met at Tahiti. Despite the increasing visibility and openness of sexuality back home, seeing almost naked, free-spirited women readily available for the taking was still enough to both instill shock and create myths among British navigators.

All in all, Bougainville presents sex as the very essence of Tahitian society, and he must be seen as a founding father of the erotic myth of Tahiti, his widely read journal being full of alluring generalisations: “The very air which the people breathe, their songs, their dances, almost constantly attended with indecent postures all aspire to call to mind the sweets of love, all engage to give themselves up to them.”³⁸ These early reports from Tahiti became

³⁵ Bougainville, p. 228.

³⁶ Bougainville, p. 257.

³⁷ Bougainville, p. 257.

³⁸ Bougainville, p. 257

well-known³⁹, and we can safely assume most of the later navigators had read them or at least heard stories retold from them. We will now look closer at some of the most discussed themes among travellers following in Bougainville's footsteps; sex, beauty and women.

Sex

Let us turn to the sexual aspect first, the image of the islanders - especially the women - as amorous, indecent creatures, easily obtained by the Europeans as sex partners. These images and issues were hotly debated by travellers to Tahiti after Wallis and Bougainville. What is rarely mentioned is that while Bougainville had indeed created the myth of Tahiti as a paradise of free love and sex by enthusiastically writing down his experiences, he had also noticed a sense of uneasiness among the women,⁴⁰ a fact supporting the claim put forward by Alexander Bolyanatz that the offering of sexual services was not something customary to Tahiti, but was a result of the previous encounter with Wallis. Bolyanatz convincingly argues that Bougainville's warm welcome at Tahiti was caused by the change of tactics from the Tahitians after the initial violent encounter with the *Dolphin* crew, and had little to do with the innate friendliness or sexual promiscuity of the Tahitian people.⁴¹ Bougainville had no knowledge of the visit made by Wallis, and so he assumed that offering the sexual services of women was common practice when receiving strangers at Tahiti. Thus he kick-started one of the most immortal myths of Tahiti based on deceptive evidence.

The next major expedition to the Pacific was led by James Cook with the *Endeavour* in 1769. At Tahiti, Cook was surprised by seeing a grown man having sex with a girl not more than 10-12 years old, in public. However, Cook interpreted the act as done "more from Custom than Lewdness".⁴² In general, Cook never allowed himself to portray Tahiti and its women in Bougainville's erotic-romantic terms. Sydney Parkinson, an artist hired to draw sketches of plants and animals on the voyage of the *Endeavour*, was more concerned about the European demand for sexual services, than the Tahitians' willingness to offer them:

"Most of our ship's company procured temporary wives amongst the natives, with whom they occasionally co-habited; an indulgence which even many reputed virtuous Europeans allow themselves in uncivilized parts of the world, with impunity; as if a change of place altered the

³⁹ Marshall, pp. 258-259.

⁴⁰ Bougainville, p. 218.

⁴¹ Alexander H. Bolyanatz, *Pacific Romanticism. Tahiti and the European Imagination* (Westport: Praeger, 2004), p. x.

⁴² James Cook, *The Voyage of the Endeavour, 1768-1771. Edited by J. C. Beaglehole* (Cambridge: Hakluyt Society/University Press, 1955), pp. 93-94.

moral turpitude of fornication; and what is a sin in Europe, is only a simple innocent gratification in America; which is to suppose, that the obligation to chastity is local, and restricted only to particular parts of the globe.”⁴³

Cook’s second voyage produced an abundance of journals and narratives with conflicting views of the degree of sexual promiscuity among the Tahitian women. Cook himself felt a need to alter the image created by Bougainville and others. According to Cook, gaining sexual favours from the women had become less common since the first voyage, particularly considering women belonging to a royal household.⁴⁴ Not only that, Cook felt the women were entitled to some redress after being portrayed as simple-minded nymphs:

“Great Injustice has been done the Women of Otaheite and the Society Isles, by those who have represented them without exception as ready to grant the last favour to any man who will come up to their price. But this is by no means the case; the favours of Married women and also the unmarried of the better sort, are as difficult to obtain here as in any other Country whatever.”⁴⁵

A more solid attempt to puncture a myth is hard to imagine when done by such a famed and respected personality as Cook. But what about the many sexual encounters between Europeans and the islanders that did in fact occur? Cook surely knew about these incidents and had to acknowledge they were real, so he offered an explanation:

“That there are Prostitutes here as well as in other Countrys is very true, perhaps more in proportion and such were those who came on board the Ship to our people and frequented the Post we had on shore. By seeing these mix indiscriminately with those of a different turn, even of the first rank, one is at first inclined to think that they are all disposed the same way & that the only difference is in their price. But the truth is, the women who becomes a Prostitute, do not seem on their opinion to have committed a crime of so deep a die as to exclude her from the Esteem and Society of the Community in general. On the whole a stranger who visits England might with equal justice draw the Characters of the women there, from those which he might meet with on board the Ships in one of the Naval Ports, or in the Purlieu of Covent Garden & Dury [sic] lane.”⁴⁶

In short, Tahiti’s position as a sexual paradise was nothing more than port town prostitution of the British kind, the only difference being that prostitution was much less frowned upon in Tahiti than back home.

⁴³ Sydney Parkinson, *A Journal of a Voyage to the South Seas, in his Majesty’s Ship The Endeavour* (London, 1784), pp. 25-26.

⁴⁴ James Cook, *The Voyage of the Resolution and Adventure, 1772-1775*. Edited by J. C. Beaglehole (Cambridge: Hakluyt Society/University Press, 1961), p. 236.

⁴⁵ Cook, *Resolution and Adventure*, pp. 238-239.

⁴⁶ Cook, *Resolution and Adventure*, p. 239.

Some of Cook's crewmembers of the second voyage shared this view, others did not. Those who supported the erotic-romantic notion were often first-timers to the island, like Swedish naturalist Anders Sparrman. Obviously inspired by Bougainville, Sparrman described the first moments after dropping anchor, when the men "enchanted by the hundreds of docile and agreeable young females, naked to the waist, who surrounded the ship, felt the Paradise of Venus herself was within their grasp."⁴⁷ The words of Bougainville are echoed not only by Sparrman's use of mythic expressions, but also in the ambiguous attitude towards the sexual promiscuity of the women, described as a "great fault – but a fault which to our people appeared both desirable and agreeable".⁴⁸ The recurrence of the word "fault" is another indication that the Tahitian women did not act in a manner familiar to the European visitors. Romanticists like Sparrman - no matter how fascinated - could not entirely put away the notion that the islanders were depraved and vulgar.

This intriguing "fault" Sparrman found particularly among the young women. Watching them sing and dance at night he commented that "their words, added to their gestures, gave us the impression that they did not hold in great esteem that modesty which is the most precious jewel of their sex."⁴⁹ This condescending view of the young women was shared by Second Lieutenant James Burney who claimed he had seen 12 year old girls walking around pregnant, which made him question "whether they have any Idea of Chastity being a virtue".⁵⁰ Despite his obvious fascination of the island and its inhabitants, Sparrman could not avoid condemning his fellow travellers:

“(…)whose religious principles, which were as weak as their moral sense, were put to a rude test and were immediately shaken. Often, captivated by the beauties who swam around our ships and by the young girls who, half-naked, danced and sung upon the decks, they were deprived of all good sense and succumbed to the customs of the land in which they found themselves.”⁵¹

German naturalist George Forster also held a very different view than Cook regarding the sexual relations between the Europeans and the Tahitians. According to Forster:

⁴⁷ Anders Sparrman, *A Voyage round the World with Captain Cook in H. M. S. Resolution* (London: Robert Hale Ltd., 1953), p. 51.

⁴⁸ Sparrman, p. 51.

⁴⁹ Sparrman, p. 67.

⁵⁰ James Burney, *The Private Journal of James Burney. Second Lieutenant of the Adventure on Cook's Second Voyage, 1772-1773*. (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1975), p. 68.

⁵¹ Burney, p. 68.

“Some of the females who came on board (...) seemed not to be above nine or ten years old, and had not the least marks of puberty. So early an acquaintance with the world seems to argue an uncommon degree of voluptuosness, and cannot fail of affecting the nation in general.”⁵²

Like Sparrman, Forster was not directly condemning of this sexual frivolity among the islanders. But neither was he as critical of his fellow seafarers as Sparrman was, adopting a more apologetic view:

“The view of several of these nymphs swimming nimbly all around the sloop, such as nature had formed them, was perhaps more than sufficient entirely to subvert the little reason which a mariner might have left to govern his passions.”⁵³

The young Forster did his best to portray the Tahitians in approving terms, also when analyzing their unorthodox approach to sexual relations. He did not agree with Cook’s comparison of the Tahitian women with the prostitutes of England:

“If we consider that the simplicity of their education and of their dress, makes many actions perfectly innocent here, which, according to our customs, would be blameable, we cannot impute that degree of unbounded licentiousness to them, with which the prostitutes of Europe are unhappily reproached.”⁵⁴

In other words, the Tahitian women were not to blame for being less enlightened than their English counterparts, thus prostituting oneself was considerably more repugnant in civilized areas than in Tahiti, where the women simply did not know better. Not only that, Forster saw the sexual promiscuousness as a logical result of the abundance of easily accessible resources on the island:

“Where the means of subsistence are so easy, and the wants of people so few, it is natural that the great purpose of human life, that of multiplying the number of rational beings, is not loaded with that multitude of miseries which are attendant upon the married state in civilized countries. The impulses of nature are therefore followed without restraint and the consequence is a great population, in proportion to the small part of the island which is cultivated.”⁵⁵

Also on board during Cook’s second voyage was astronomer William Wales, who would prove to be one of the fiercest revisionists and demythologizers that would visit Tahiti in the early period. He supported Cook’s opinion of the Tahitian women, that sexual services were not as easily obtained as vividly described by earlier visitors to the island. In general, Wales

⁵² George Forster, *A Voyage Round the World* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2000), p. 148.

⁵³ G. Forster, p. 148.

⁵⁴ G. Forster, pp. 184-185.

⁵⁵ G. Forster, p. 198.

felt the need to “say a little in defence of their Characters, which have, in my opinion, been as much depreciated as their beauties have been Magnified.”⁵⁶ The latter will be discussed further below.

The women of Tahiti and their sexuality played a significant role in the much debated circumstances surrounding the mutiny on the *Bounty* in 1789. Captain William Bligh felt sure they were at least partly to blame for making his men turn against him. After all, the men had a chance to return to an island where “the allurements of dissipation are beyond any thing that can be conceived.”⁵⁷ When Bligh returned to Tahiti with the *Providence* in 1791 Tahitian sexuality was still an issue of controversy among the Europeans. Crewmember George Tobin was shocked at some of what he witnessed one evening: “A scene presented itself the most repugnant possible to human nature, a father and mother bargaining for the untasted charms of their child, and it was difficult to discover, which expected the greatest delight.”⁵⁸ 24 years had gone since the discovery of Tahiti, but Tobin’s remarks were typical of sentiments that had been expressed by Europeans since the beginning; a mixture of repugnance at unrestrained Tahitian sexuality with the paternalistic view that, after all, uncivilized people knew no better. This point of view particularly comes to light in Tobin’s comparison of Tahitian women with European ones:

“The instructed daughters of chastity of our colder regions, no noubt in their own strength, look with pity and contempt on the infirmity of these poor Islanders. True, from their infancy they are taught that this alone will pave their way to heaven. This jewel inviolate, every discordant passion may riot without impeachment or controul; The children of these Southern Isles know no such doctrine, nor, are they less happy for it; If frail, yet do they largely teem with charity and benevolence. Then condemn them not too harshly, for such is the prejudice of sisters who shared the warm confidence of their bosoms – must know them no more. T’is a heartrending truth – Better then, perhaps do the thoughtless South Sea Islanders act in looking with a benevolent eye on what mankind has from the ‘beginning’ and will to the ‘end’, err in, even should civilized institutions – which is hardly possible – become more severe- and a still greater restraint be imposed on the laws of all powerful nature.”⁵⁹

Interestingly enough, one could interpret the condescending words of Tobin as an acknowledgement of the existence of an inherited Tahitian quality superior to any “civilized” European; the ability to deal with such a natural thing as sex without prudeness and condemnation.

⁵⁶ Cook, *Resolution and Adventure*, p. 796.

⁵⁷ William Bligh, *A Narrative of the Mutiny on Board His Majesty’s Ship Bounty; and the Subsequent Voyage of Part of the Crew, in the Ship’s Boat From Tofoa, One of the Friendly Islands, to Timor, a Dutch Settlement in the East Indies* (London, 1790), p. 10.

⁵⁸ Douglas Oliver, *Return to Tahiti. Bligh’s Second Breadfruit Voyage* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1988), p. 72.

⁵⁹ Oliver, p. 73.

The missionaries who arrived in the *Duff* in 1797 had no doubt chosen Tahiti based at least partly on the image of Tahiti as a depraved island of sin.⁶⁰ One can image the puzzlement among the islanders on being visited by Europeans who did not drink and refused to accept the services of their women, and who would also lecture the islanders in a considerably more serious and insistent manner. One missionary reported:

“One of our brethren this evening sitting in his birth writing, a young girl came in, and expressed her surprise that we behaved so different to them from what our countrymen had done. He told her that such practices were wicked, and that if we did such things our God would be angry. “Oh”, said she, “but I will come to you in the night, and then no one can see us.” – He replied, “Nothing can be hid from our God; the night to him is as bright as the day, and there is no darkness or shadow or death where any of the workers of wickedness can hide themselves. But, if you first put away your evil customs we should love you.”⁶¹

Even though the missionaries had expected Tahiti to be in a morally bad state, they were still shocked at some of what they witnessed and experienced. Among other things, the Wilson journal contains several references to transsexualism. Whether this was a recent development in Tahitian society is hard to say. It is only very briefly mentioned by the voyagers before the arrival of the *Duff*, and does not seem to have been as widespread as to have made much of an impression on them. A solitary line in Sydney Parkinson’s journal reads: “On the 14th, we saw a person who had the appearance of an hermaphrodite.”⁶² Thus it is surprising to read the missionaries’ claim that in 1797 there were

“in various districts of the island (...) men who dress as women; work with them at the cloth; are confined to the same provisions and rule of eating and dressing; may not eat with the men, or of their food, but have separate plantations for their peculiar use.”⁶³

However, later in the journal the transsexuals - *mawhoos* - are said to number only 7 or 8 people. Whatever may be the thruth they did enough of a negative impression on the missionaries to influence their view of the Tahitians in general:

“[The *mawhoos*] seek the courtship of men the same as women do, nay, are more jelaous of the men who cohabit with them, and always refuse to sleep with women. We are obliged here to draw a veil over other practices too horrible to mention. (...) So depraved are these poor heathens, that even their women do not despise those fellows, but form friendships with them.”⁶⁴

⁶⁰ John Garrett, *To Live Among the Stars: Christian Origins in Oceania* (Geneve: World Council of Churches, 1982), pp. 9-11.

⁶¹ William Wilson (ed.), *A Missionary Voyage to the Southern Pacific Ocean, Performed in the Years 1796, 1797, 1798 in the Ship Duff Commanded by Captain James Wilson* (London, 1799), p. 172.

⁶² Parkinson, p. 27.

⁶³ Wilson, p. 156.

⁶⁴ Wilson, p. 198.

A much more discussed segment of Tahitian society is that of the *ariori* – often referred to as entertainers with both religious significance and power, practising uninhibited sex among themselves and killing their offspring at birth. On his first visit Cook viewed their customs as “inhuman and contrary to human nature,”⁶⁵ referring to their “free liberty in love” and the smothering of their children. During the same visit Joseph Banks probably misinterpreted the state of affairs when he claimed that infanticide was carried out by those who would not marry, and the decision was decided by the father “who if he does not choose to acknowledge both [the child] and the woman, and engage to contribute his part towards their support, orders the child to be strangled, which is instantly put into execution.”⁶⁶

Both European perceptions of the *ariori* society and infanticide will be further discussed in other chapters. But before moving on, let us look at a particular entry in the Wilson journal, connecting both the custom of infanticide and the introduction of European goods to Tahitian sexuality. According to the journal the parents often chose to spare the life of the male, which naturally led to a disproportion of the sexes among the population. This led to an increase in certain sinful activities:

“The men who are not wealthy in cloth, hogs, or English articles, wherewith to purchase a wife, must go without one; and this leads them to practice the great crime of onanism to an excessive degree, and renders them unfit to cohabit with women: but all their vices of this nature are too shocking to be related.”⁶⁷

In conclusion, the image of Tahitian sexuality seems incompatible with the image of the noble savage. The idea of promiscuous women easily obtained was both enchanting and disturbing to the Europeans, but it was never seen as “noble” or held up as a viable alternative to European manners and morals. In this case, the Tahitians were not “children of nature” but rather immoral “nymphs of Cythera”.

Beauty

The beauty of the Tahitian women were often among the very first things described in the European journals upon arrival to Tahiti. We have already mentioned the early descriptions by Robertson and Bougainville, portraying nymphs of outstanding beauty climbing aboard the

⁶⁵ Cook, *Endeavour*, p. 128.

⁶⁶ Joseph Banks, *Journal of the right hon. Sir Joseph Banks during Captain Cook's first voyage in H.M.S. Endeavour in 1768-71 to Terra Del Fuego, Otahite, New Zealand, Australia, The Dutch East Indies, etc.* (London: Macmillan & co Ltd., 1896), p. 174.

⁶⁷ Wilson, p. 192.

ships. During Cook's first voyage Joseph Banks described the islanders with less mythic imagery, but still saw them all as:

“Very well made, and some handsome, both men and women; the only bad feature they have is their noses, which are in general flat, but to balance this their teeth are almost without exception even and white to perfection, and the eyes of the women are full of expression and fire”⁶⁸

During Cook's second visit opinions started to vary, and some seamen were even disappointed. James Burney had “expected to find People nearly as white as Europeans. Some of the better sort are tolerably white, more so than a Spaniard or Portugeze, but the generality are of a dark olive Colour.”⁶⁹ Burney had obviously based his expectations on European ideals of beauty, and had to adjust his view upon arrival: “There are much handsomer women in England & many, more ordinary. I mean as to the face – but for fine turnned Limbs & well made persons I think they cannot be excelled”.⁷⁰ After spending some time on the island he offered an explanation for his disappointment, as he discovered that “the Children are in general exceedingly beautifull – as they grow up they lose it for want of that care which in Europe is taken to preserve Beauty”.⁷¹

On the same voyage Lieutenant John Elliott described the islanders in more traditional terms: “This island appeared to us to be the Paradise of those seas, the Men being all fine, tall, well-made, with humane open countenances; the Women beautiful, compaired with all those that we had seen.”⁷² William Wales, on the other hand, always with a critical perspective on matters, downplayed both the beauty of the Tahitian women and their liberal sexuality. The myth of Tahiti had been created and circulated, but whether these images of beauty fit the reality that the sailors met upon arrival varied greatly among the seamen accompanying Cook, and on later voyages. William Bligh contributed a great part of the cause of the *Bounty* mutiny to the Tahitian women, who were “handsome, mild and cheerful in their manner and conversation, possessed of great sensibility, and have sufficient delicacy to make them admired and beloved.”⁷³ On board the *Pandora* in search of the mutineers, surgeon George Hamilton dreamed Bougainvillian dreams: “This may well be called the Cytheria of the southern hemisphere, not only from the beauty and elegance of the women, but their being so

⁶⁸ Banks, p. 127.

⁶⁹ Burney, p. 67.

⁷⁰ Burney, p. 67.

⁷¹ Burney, p. 68.

⁷² John Elliott & Richard Pickersgill, *Captain Cook's Second Voyage: The Journals of Lieutenants Elliott and Pickersgill* (London: Caliban Books, 1984), p. 19.

⁷³ Bligh, p. 9.

deeply versed in, and so passionately fond of the Eleusinian mysteries⁷⁴.⁷⁵ Arriving in the *Discovery* the same year a crewmember named Manby described the sight of canoes:

“(…)fill’d with beautiful Brunettes (…) struggling to approach the Ship and gain admittance and on finding themselves prohibited until our arrival in Anchorage reproachful glances from their sparkling Eyes, plainly bespoke their displeasure at our refusal.”⁷⁶

Although some of the visitors to Tahiti were a bit more modest in their praise, two and a half decades after Bougainville the sight of the Tahitian women was a part of the myth of Tahiti that most visitors to Tahiti could contribute to. In 1797 another type of visitor arrived - the missionary - and not surprisingly he was not as easily convinced as the seamen of former voyages:

“Their wild disorderly behavior, strong smell of the cocoa-nut oil, together with the tricks of the arreoies, lessened the favourable opinion we had formed of them; neither could we see aught of that elegance and beauty in their women for which they have been so greatly celebrated.”⁷⁷

A curious theme recurring in some of the journals - and an excellent example of the myth of Tahiti turning into disappointment – is the Europeans’ displeasure at seeing the Tahitian women devour meat. Banks was the first to express his feelings on the matter: “Custom will make almost any meat palatable, and the women, especially, are fond of this, though after they had eaten it, I confess I was not extremely fond of their company”.⁷⁸ George Foster, always eager to see the Tahitians in a favourable light – and therefore particularly disappointed when they did not live up to his expectations – could not agree more. The sight of the women gorging greedily on meat made Forster turn to unusually harsh words:

“The instances of sensibility (...) and the favourable ideas which we had from thence formed of the Taheitians were so recent in our memories, that we were much hurt at the sight of these creatures, who had entirely forgot the duties of life, and abandoned themselves to the brutal sway of the passions. That there should exist so great a degree of immorality in a nation, otherwise so happy in its simplicity, and in the fewness of its wants, is a reflection very disgraceful to human nature in general, which, viewed to its greatest advantage here, is nevertheless imperfect. Is it not to be lamented that the best gifts of a benevolent Creator seem to be the most liable to frequent abuse, and that nothing is so easy to mankind as error?”⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Ancient Greek initiation rites for the cult of Demeter – the goddess of life, agriculture and fertility – and her daughter, Persephone.

⁷⁵ George Hamilton, *A Voyage Round the World in his Majesty's Frigate Pandora* (Sydney: Hordern House, 1998), p. 37.

⁷⁶ George Vancouver, *A Voyage of Discovery to the North Pacific Ocean and Round the World 1791-1795* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1984), p. 393. Footnote nr. 1.

⁷⁷ Wilson, p. 56.

⁷⁸ Banks, p. 135.

⁷⁹ G. Forster, p. 185.

Forster's statement was a culmination of several other disappointments of greater importance than the meat-eating, but his choice of condemning words such as "immorality" and "disgraceful to human nature" illustrates how unfair the European expectations to the Tahitians could be. George Hamilton, ever elevating the image of Tahiti to a surreal and paradisiacal level, also struggled to accept the meat-eating:

"It certainly does not convey the most delicate ideas, to a mind impressed with much sensibility, to see a fine woman devouring a piece of beef; and those voluptuaries, who may be said to exist only by their women, would naturally endeavour to remove the possibility of presupposing a disgusting idea, in that object in which all their happiness centres."⁸⁰

The exaltation of Tahitian beauty could fit into the general "glorification of savage life" as Ellingson defined the noble savage concept. But as we have seen, the expectations to the physical attributes of the Tahitians could be unfair and would often lead to disappointments, as the example of the meat-eating women illustrates.

The Role of Women

Seeing the Tahitian women as free-spirited nymphs inhabiting a paradise would naturally influence how the Europeans interpreted the women's position in Tahitian society.

Bougainville established that "the endeavours to please are their most ferocious occupation."⁸¹ On the issue of marriage he could not determine if the institution rested on religious or civil foundations, only that the women owed their men "a blind submission".⁸² He did find polygamy to be established among the islanders, and once again explained it in amorous terms: "As love is their only passion, the great number of women is the only luxury of the opulent."⁸³

James Cook wondered, as would later visitors to the island, at why the women could not eat with the men. He found it strange, considering that "they are a people in every other instance fond of Society and much so of their women".⁸⁴ However, Cook and his men invited the Tahitian women on board to dine, which they happily did as long as they were not seen by the Tahitian men. This made Cook doubt that the matter had much to do with ethic principles

⁸⁰ Hamilton, pp. 51-52.

⁸¹ Bougainville, p. 256

⁸² Bougainville, p. 256.

⁸³ Bougainville, p. 256.

⁸⁴ Cook, *Endeavour*, p. 123.

or religious beliefs: “Whatever may be the reason for this custom it certainly affects their outward manners more than their principals.”⁸⁵

During Cook’s first voyage Joseph Banks viewed the Tahitian institution of marriage as nothing special: “Marriage in these islands is no more than an agreement between man and woman, totally independent of the priest. (...) Few people, however, enter this state, but rather choose freedom.”⁸⁶ Sydney Parkinson, in conflict with Bougainville, claimed that polygamy was *not* allowed at Tahiti, but even married women had “not a very delicate sense of modesty: their husbands will allow you any liberty with their wives, except the last, which they do not approve.”⁸⁷ The latter part of the statement is in conflict with nearly all other sources; the women may not have had complete freedom to do as they pleased, but the granting of sexual services was often condoned by the husbands, as discussed above.

Johann Reinhold Forster offered one of the most romantic interpretations of Tahitian marriage, and managed to forge the image of the sensual Tahitian woman into an analysis of Tahitian society:

“The husband and wife of his bosom, whom love unites by the silken ties of matrimony, form the first society. This union is, in these happy regions, first founded on the call of nature, in mutual assistance, and the sweet hopes of seeing themselves reproduced in a numerous offspring.”⁸⁸

Forster saw Tahitian “passion” as a driving force behind the happiness of the islanders. It was the cause of love behind man and woman, mother and child, and in the end between every individual in society.

“The offspring of such a happy couple early imbibe by the example of their parents, that kindness and benevolence, and those refined sentiments of parents, and wish to reduce them to practice, as soon as they feel the call of nature and find a partner whose sentiments are in unison with their own; so that these simple, but more exalted ideas of matrimonial union, are thus propagated and perpetuated in the progeny of a virtuous and tender couple.”⁸⁹

Forster’s analysis is remarkable for its urge to include the romantic image of Tahiti into an explanation of how Tahitian society worked as a whole. The liberal attitudes to sex were not

⁸⁵ Cook, *Endeavour*, p. 123.

⁸⁶ Banks, p. 174.

⁸⁷ Parkinson, p. 24.

⁸⁸ Johann Reinhold Forster, *Observations Made During a Voyage Round the World* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1996), p. 223.

⁸⁹ J. R. Forster, p. 224.

results of barbarism or heathenism, it was part and parcel of the natural symbiosis of Tahitian society.

In general, the Europeans saw the Tahitian woman as being subjected to the will of her husband, but the husband would usually allot her a great amount of freedom. When the missionaries arrived they criticized the Tahitians for not ridding themselves of the custom of polygamy. Captain James Wilson tried to convince a priest:

“(…) how little such a state of polygamy was suited to happiness; that no woman could be either so attached, faithful, affectionate, or careful to promote domestic felicity, as where the heart was fixed on one object without a rival. The old priest did not at all relish this doctrine, and said, such was not the custom of Otaheite; but the ladies highly approved, and said the Pritāne⁹⁰ custom was my ty, my ty, very good.”⁹¹

At best, Tahitian women were seen as playful and otherworldly nymphs of exceptional beauty, at worst they were seen as whores under the absolute control of their husbands. Rarely were they appreciated as human beings with a purpose and value beyond what they could offer through their bodies. The women of Tahiti were not seen as noble savages, but as creatures of a sexual realm the Europeans could enter and either condemn or give themselves in to, perhaps comparable to today's tourists visiting countries with a widespread sex trade.

Conclusion

With his vivid descriptions of Tahiti as a paradise of lust and beauty, Louis-Antoine de Bougainville set the tone for future accounts and journals, and the image was still alive when the missionaries arrived almost thirty years later, undoubtedly worried by the tales of sin and degradation.

Not all visitors to Tahiti agreed; James Cook and William Wales in particular did their best to weaken the myth, but not enough to kill it. The myth gained new potency after the mutiny on the *Bounty*, and later accounts echoes the early descriptions made by Bougainville.

When viewing Tahitian sexuality the navigators were often drawn between their own joy at visiting the land of free love and their own moral upbringing of the European kind, which led them to write accounts characterized by being both condemning and praising at the same time. Generally, the navigators saw what they wanted to see. This included the image of

⁹⁰ Pritāne = Tahitian word for “Britain”.

⁹¹ Wilson, p. 61.

the exceptional beauty of the Tahitian women. Some seamen were naturally disappointed when the women did not live up to their expectations, others had been convinced even before arriving at the island, and were easily overwhelmed by what they saw and experienced. These preconceived notions indicate that Europe was, after all, not completely satisfying to those who dreamt of free love and liberty. The idea of a paradise island with beautiful and uninhibited women was still more than enough to create a myth among the Englishmen, despite the increasingly modern view towards sex and beauty back home.

All this would often lead to the conclusion that Tahitian women were simple, nymph-like creatures, entirely under the command of their men, whose sole purpose in life was to please both their husbands and visitors. It was a part of the image of Tahiti few were willing to alter.

To use the term “noble savage” to describe the European perceptions of the Tahitian women is hardly profitable; the navigators were fascinated by their promiscuousness and beauty, but the women were never seen as “noble” and often the enchanted descriptions of Tahitian sexuality were coupled with concerns of its immorality. The English voyagers had indeed found something new and different at Tahiti, but they were reluctant to portray these women as embodying qualities superior to European manners and morals.

3. The Garden of Eden

The image of Tahiti consisted not only of the characteristics of its inhabitants, but also the natural, geological and zoological features of the island itself. The alluring myth of Tahiti did not just evoke images of amorous primitives at one with nature but also spectacular scenery, bountiful natural resources and wildlife. This chapter takes a closer look at these often vague and blurred perceptions, what they specifically contained, and how they influenced the image of Tahiti.

Here we might get close to identifying something resembling the noble savage myth. After all, the noble savages are said to have been seen as “children of nature”.⁹² Such notions seem to project a view that the islanders were handling their environmental and climatical prerequisites in a particularly admirable way, perhaps better – or at least different – than a modernizing Britain on the brink of an industrial revolution. We will look closer at these assertions and try to examine whether the European visitors really held these views. And again, we will try to reveal whether these perceptions were the results of preconceived notions or direct reactions from what the navigators encountered at Tahiti, in this case the environmental condition of the island.

Scenery

English travel journals from Tahiti often contained grandiose descriptions of the island’s physical beauty. Discovering Tahiti together with Captain Samuel Wallis in the *Dolphin* in 1767, George Robertson was excited to report that “the country had the most Beautiful appearance it is posable to Imagin.”⁹³ Not surprisingly, Louis-Antoine de Bougainville agreed, arriving shortly after Wallis. Hiking across the island he felt as he had been “transported into the garden of Eden,”⁹⁴ and described “beautiful landscapes, covered with the richest productions of nature, in that beautiful disorder which it was never in the power of art to imitate.”⁹⁵ Bougainville was fond of religious and mythical imagery, but for the most part he allotted this kind of language to his descriptions of Tahitian sexuality. However, Joseph

⁹² E.g. Porter, p. 358.

⁹³ Robertson, p. 139.

⁹⁴ Bougainville, p. 228.

⁹⁵ Bougainville, p. 244.

Banks picked up the Greek mythology when he visited the island with James Cook during his first voyage. Just like Bougainville, Banks found himself in high spirits while hiking at Tahiti:

”In this manner we proceeded for four or five miles, under groves of cocoanut and breadfruit trees, loaded with a profusion of fruit, and giving the most grateful shade I have ever experienced. Under these were the habitations of the people, most of them without walls; in short, the scene that we saw was the truest picture of an Arcadia⁹⁶ of which we were going to be kings that the imagination can form.”⁹⁷

Banks concluded that “no country can boast such delightful walks as this”.⁹⁸ Naturalist Anders Sparrman would surely agree, arriving with Cook’s second expedition and reaching similar conclusions as Robertson: “Judging from all that I have seen both before and since my visit, I am of the opinion that there is no more beautiful island in the world than Otaheite.”⁹⁹ For George Forster, always looking for something to enjoy and praise, the beauty of Tahitian nature was an obvious subject:

“We contemplated the scenery before us early the next morning, when its beauties were most engaging. (...) The plain at the foot of the hills was very narrow in this place, but always conveyed the pleasing ideas of fertility, plenty, and happiness. (...) The serenity of the sky, the genial warmth of the air, and the beauty of the landscape, united to exhilarate our spirits.”¹⁰⁰

The physical beauty of Tahiti remained a point of agreement for almost all visitors, and need not be dwelt upon too long here. Eternal sceptic William Wales was one of the few who ever made a negative remark about the island’s appearance. Like on other issues, Wales’s agenda was to ridicule hopeless romanticists such as Bougainville, rather than an actual expression of disappointment at Tahitian nature:

“The face of the Country, making some allowance for a warm imagination, is not badly described by Mr Bougainville; but some allowances must be made by every Person, who has not seen the Place, and would not be deceived. That Gentleman seems to have been almost lost in admiration of its Beauties, and those of its Inhabitants all the time he was here. His colouring is indeed so high, that one cannot help suspecting a false glance.”¹⁰¹

Wales did grudgingly admit Tahiti to be “a very beautiful Island, and appears, no doubt, to great advantage after a long Voyage”, but stubbornly added that “I remember well that England does so, and run no risk in asserting that Otahitee would make but an indifferent

⁹⁶ A region of Greece, historically known as a refuge.

⁹⁷ Banks, p. 74.

⁹⁸ Banks, p. 133.

⁹⁹ Sparrman, p. 56.

¹⁰⁰ G. Forster, p. 150.

¹⁰¹ Cook, *Resolution and Adventure*, p. 795.

appearance if placed beside it.”¹⁰² Wales’s companionless remarks about Tahiti’s appearance reveal more about his wish to appear as a cool-headed man of science and reason than about Tahiti itself.

Food and resources

A more controversial issue than the appearance of the island was the claim that natural resources were so abundant and easily accessible that it required minimal effort to secure them. A condition that, if true, would necessarily influence the organization of Tahitian society to a considerable degree. In this context, the breadfruit is crucial. Easily harvested and common at Tahiti, the breadfruit has played an important role in the island’s history. The sole purpose of the *Bounty* voyage was to collect breadfruit plants at Tahiti and transport them to the slave colonies in the West Indies, where it was hoped that the fruit would serve as a cheap and reliable food source for the slaves. Tim Fulford, Debbie Lee and Peter J. Kitson have argued that the breadfruit became a symbol of the “indigenous liberty and natural fertility” that Europeans dreamed about.¹⁰³ Ironically, it was Joseph Banks’ idea to put the plants into use for the British Empire that destroyed its reputation among romanticists; no longer were the plants solely benefitting the happy islanders of Tahiti, but were going to be used to aid Western slavery. Thus the breadfruit turned into a commodity – like sugar - that symbolized European bigotry and immorality.¹⁰⁴

The availability of food was indeed commented on by early visitors, and George Robertson was particularly impressed by the fruit; both its availability and its quality:

“Plantains Bananas Bread Fruit and a fine large sort of fruit which we called Aples (...) this perhaps is the finest fruit in the world, they are the best fruit to eat off the Trees that I ever saw, and they made most excellent pyes, tarts and Puddings, that ever was Eate...”¹⁰⁵

From such reports an idea that we might call “natural affluence” was soon established; the claim that food was so easily accessible and abundant that “these happy people may almost be said to be exempt from the curse of our forefathers”¹⁰⁶, as Joseph Banks put it during Cook’s first visit. Banks continued by putting forward a critique of Tahitian society: “Scarcely can it be said that they earn their bread by the sweat of their brow, when their chief sustenance,

¹⁰² Cook, *Resolution and Adventure*, p. 795.

¹⁰³ Fulford, p. 110.

¹⁰⁴ Fulford, p. 115.

¹⁰⁵ Robertson, p. 167.

¹⁰⁶ Banks, p. 134.

bread-fruit, is procured with no more trouble than that of climbing a tree and pulling it down.”¹⁰⁷ Banks expressed a notion that would become common among visitors to Tahiti, that the islanders *could* have developed an advanced form of agriculture had it not been for the easily accessible food. Banks speculated:

“If a man in the course of his life planted ten such trees (which, if well done, might take the labour of an hour or thereabouts), he would as completely fulfil his duty to his own as well as future generations, as we, natives of less temperate climates, can do by toiling in the cold of winter to sow, and in the heat of summer to reap, the annual produce of our soil; which when once gathered into the barn, must again be re-sowed and re-reaped as often as the colds of winter or the heats of summer return to make such labour disagreeable”¹⁰⁸

There is an implicit argument here that explains Tahiti’s “uncivilized” condition as caused by her ecological prerequisites rather than by the primitive nature of her inhabitants. Whether Banks was right in his evaluation will not be discussed here, but at least it suggests that European perceptions of foreign peoples were not entirely based on romantic dreams or Enlightened moral superiority.

The idea of natural affluence remained a controversial topic throughout the period. By the end of Cook’s first visit, Sydney Parkinson noted that “provisions of all kinds were, at this time, very scarce; and some of the inhabitants almost famished. This scarcity was principally occasioned by supplying us too liberally with breadfruit.”¹⁰⁹ A rather surprising claim, given the earlier reports of resources in the plenty. Perhaps the quote says more about the weak position of the local *aree*¹¹⁰ than signalling an actual depletion of island resources caused by the presence of a single European ship. Nevertheless, by his second visit Cook had to admit that supplies were not as easily accessible as claimed on previous voyages:

“It is true some things require but little labour, but others again require a good deal, such as roots of every kind and Bananas and Plantains will not grow spontaneously but by proper cultivation, nor will the Bread and Coccoi nutt trees come to perfection without.”¹¹¹

At arrival, Second Lieutenant James Burney had noted that fruit and vegetables could be easily obtained from the islanders, but not fowls and pigs:

“These the Inhabitants carried up in the country as fast as they could on our arrival – the Chief Aree having forbid their selling us any without his permission the number of Hogs & fowls carried

¹⁰⁷ Banks, p. 134-135.

¹⁰⁸ Banks, p. 135.

¹⁰⁹ Parkinson, p. 34.

¹¹⁰ *aree*, chief

¹¹¹ Cook, *Resoution and Adventure*, p. 235.

off the island by European Ships within this 5 or 6 years must have greatly thinnd their number & made this prohibition necessary.”¹¹²

Despite the possibility that the European visits were causing a depletion of the natural resources, the image of Tahiti as a land of natural affluence where one could enjoy one’s life with little labor lasted throughout the period. Despite his worries, Cook acknowledged this fact when one of his gunners tried to desert rather than leave the island with the English ships:

“I never learnt that he had either friends or connection to confine him to any particular part of the world, all Nations were alike to him, where than can Such a Man spend his days better than at one of these isles where he can injoy all the necessaries and some of the luxuries of life in ease and Plenty.”¹¹³

Accounts by later visitors contributed to this general perception. *Bounty* mutineer James Morrison attributed the Tahitians’ lack of “arts” to the abundance of resources,¹¹⁴ while George Hamilton viewed the phenomenon as one of the underlying prerequisites of Tahiti’s blissful condition:

“What poetic fiction has painted of Eden, or Arcadia, is here realized, where the earth without tillage produces both food and cloathing, the trees loaded with the richest of fruit, the carpet of nature spread with the most odorisorous flowers, and the fair ones ever willing to fill your arms with love.”¹¹⁵

Not only that, Hamilton saw this abundance as the driving force behind the emergence of a national character more “honorable” than those of more civilized nations:

“It affords a happy instance of contradicting an opinion propagated by philosophers of a less bountiful soil, who maintain that every virtuous or charitable act a man commits, is from selfish and interested views. Here human nature appears in more amiable colours, and the soul of man, free from the gripping hand of want, atcs with a liberality and bounty that does honour to his God.”¹¹⁶

Descriptions and statements like these are conspicuously close to what the noble savage myth is said to contain. At Tahiti, the Europeans discovered – and wanted to discover – a Pacific Eden where the environment influenced not only the hapiness of the islanders, but also their character, in a decidedly positive manner.

¹¹² Burney, p. 62.

¹¹³ Cook, *Resoution and Adventure*, p. 404.

¹¹⁴ Morrison, p. 160.

¹¹⁵ Hamilton, p. 37.

¹¹⁶ Hamilton, p. 38.

The possibilities for agriculture

As mentioned above, closely connected to the theme of natural affluence was the question of whether the Tahitians could and should have developed a more advanced form of agriculture. It was often pointed out that Tahitian soil was well suited for agriculture, so the fact that the islanders limited themselves to only a low-scale form of gardening raised some questions.

Bougainville was one of the first to comment on the quality of the soil, which according to him was “the most fertile in the universe” and should be well-suited for the introduction of European plants.¹¹⁷ A few years later, naturalist Anders Sparrman visited the island and agreed with Bougainville’s evaluation. He also expressed what many of his contemporaries felt:

“The country is, without a doubt, so fertile that it would have been indeed a paradise had the natives brought as much enthusiasm to the cultivation of their lands as they had done to the building of 1,720 war-canoes. Certainly the island could have supported twice the number of inhabitants without recourse to other islands.”¹¹⁸

Thus the Eden – like condition of Tahiti was used both as an explanation for the island’s lack of advancement on the human ladder and as a critique of Tahitian laziness and failure to realize the importance of taking advantage of one’s resources in a more productive manner. Both the enlightened superiority of the sceptics and romanticist sentiments were implicit in these assessments. The paradisiacal image of Tahiti as a Garden of Eden where one could live in ease and happiness was part of the romanticist discourse, but it also served as a point for criticism among enlightened intellectuals caught up in the spirit of progress and development.

Conclusion

The physical beauty of the island of Tahiti was something the vast majority of European visitors could agree on, and constituted a significant part of the general image of Tahiti as a paradise on earth, or even “Eden”. More specifically, the island was considered a paradise also because of its abundance of natural resources, which according to many of the voyagers made life on Tahiti literally a walk in the park, although this view was disputed. The question remained whether this natural affluence was directly preventing Tahiti from evolving into a more highly advanced society. This question was strengthened by the fact that the islanders

¹¹⁷ Bougainville, p. 229.

¹¹⁸ Sparrman, p. 123.

had excellent opportunities to improve the standard of their agriculture, but did not appear to bother.

All of this enhanced the feel of “otherness” among Europeans encountering Tahitians. The fact that the islanders had so little interest in improving their society was baffling to Europeans travelling from countries on the verge of the industrial revolution, and no doubt added fuel to the fire for those who viewed “Primitive Man” as inferior to “Western Man”.

The image of Tahiti as a Pacific Eden can be seen as partly corresponding with the idea of “noble savages” as “children of nature”. Those Europeans who wished to discover a paradise where the population lived in harmony, both among themselves and with their surroundings, had plenty of opportunity to do so, and they often reported that they had found such a place. But the fertile island of Tahiti could also become a source of disappointment and serve as basis for a critique of the islanders by those who believed in progress for all nations. For some, the islanders’ unwillingness to take advantage of their own natural resources was proof in itself that some peoples were still further down the ladder than others, and to glorify these peoples would make no sense in a context of modernization and progress.

4. The Dark Side

It is easy to get lost in the harmonious fantasy image of Tahiti and to forget that the encounters between the islanders and the Europeans were at times characterised by violence, theft and European disgust at brutal Tahitian customs. This chapter analyzes European perceptions of “the dark side” of Tahiti; issues and problems that the navigators experienced as unpleasant and that did not fit in with the harmonious and romantic image of Tahiti. From the first moment of contact, Europeans had to deal practically and mentally with theft, violence and - in European eyes - dubious customs such as infanticide, human sacrifice. How did the Europeans fit these issues into their accounts and descriptions of the island known as a paradise on Earth?

It could also be useful to have some grasp of the currents of moral philosophy in Europe, and particularly Britain, at the time of the discovery of Tahiti. The navigators were usually educated men, and were carrying with them intellectual “luggage” from the Enlightened debates going on in their homeland. In an effort to analyze the *self*, British moral philosophers had set about “making an inventory of the divine anatomy of the mind,”¹¹⁹ in the words of Roy Porter. Among the efforts made by the moral philosophers to classify the different aspects of the mind, of particular interest to us is the conclusion that “the sense of good and evil was universal, being divinely implanted at all times and places.”¹²⁰ Being inspired by ideas of moral universalism, one would expect the British navigators to judge the Tahitians along the same moral guidelines as they judged their own countrymen.

As the English experienced the less favourable aspects of Tahiti, their expectations and preconceived notions would necessarily be put to a test. This was particularly so for the romanticists. The sceptics could point to sides of Tahiti that corresponded with their negative views of primitive peoples, but the romanticists often had expectations to Tahiti and its islanders that had little room for disturbing and troublesome phenomena like theft, war, infanticide and human sacrifice. How much were the romanticists willing to accept without losing their utopian dreams?

This chapter will also demonstrate how Europeans had to deal with facets of Tahitian life that were nearly impossible to glorify and were seen as decidedly more “savage” than “noble”.

¹¹⁹ Porter, p. 168.

¹²⁰ Porter, p. 169.

Initial hostilities

The very first incident of European-Tahitian contact was defined by confusion and conflict. When Samuel Wallis and the *Dolphin* dropped anchor at Tahiti for the first time, the English were unaware of the Tahitian customs related to receiving strangers to their island. Visitors were supposed to submit to the will of their hosts, and any possessions they might be carrying should be handed over before being invited ashore by the hosts.¹²¹ Thus both the English and the Tahitians were caught off guard by what happened; after greeting the sailors by branch-waving, the islanders boarded the *Dolphin* and started pulling the nails out of the ship's woodwork. The angered Englishmen drove the frightened islanders off by gunfire, a shocking violation of Tahitian custom and a break of the trust between guest and host.¹²²

In the following days attempts at trade were abruptly by acts of hostility from both sides. After losing a significant number of men to English cannon fire, the Tahitians decided on a new tactic; to befriend the sailors by offering them the sexual services of young women. The tactic worked, and peaceful trade ensued. According to scholar W. H. Pearson this was the starting point for a Tahitian foreign policy based on European intimidation, which would continue after Wallis's discovery:

“The basis then of relations between European and Tahitians in the first ten years of contact was fear of European fire-power, and Tahitian behaviour to the Europeans can be seen as a series of strategies by which the threat posed by the visitors could be diminished or controlled, or, finally, converted to the political purposes of the host *ari'i*. Amiable as Tahitians no doubt were, their celebrated benevolence to the intruders was exacted at gunpoint.”¹²³

Nevertheless, the coming encounters between Europeans and Tahitians were not as happy and peaceful as one might think, even though they never erupted into such tragedies as the *Dolphin* incident. A more common and constant problem facing navigators visiting Tahiti was theft.

Theft

Ever after the first iron nail had been pulled out of the *Dolphin*, problems of theft were constant headaches for every captain that dropped anchor at the Tahiti in the early years. Despite the lessons learned by the first encounter with the English and the change of tactics

¹²¹ W.H. Pearson, “European Intimidation and the Myth of Tahiti”, *Journal of Pacific History* 4/1969, p. 217.

¹²² Pearson, p. 217.

¹²³ Pearson, p. 217.

made by the Tahitians, theft led to problems for the French visiting shortly after. When a French gun was stolen soon after arrival, Bougainville seemed more concerned about the possibility of the thief injuring someone than the possibility that this incident of theft would lead to many more.¹²⁴ But it did not take long before Bougainville had to stop his usual romantic daydreaming for a moment and admit that, despite the Tahitians' helpfulness in every other way, "they obliged us to have our eyes upon every thing that was brought on shore, and even to look to our pockets; for even in Europe itself, one cannot see more expert filchers than the people of this country!"¹²⁵

No one would agree with this notion more than James Cook, his journals are full of frustrations on the issue. Arriving at Tahiti for the first time, his ship was swarmed by islanders, and Cook soon learned what Wallis and Bougainville had also experienced:

"It was a hard matter to keep them out of the Ship as they clime like Munkeys, but it was still harder to keep them from Stealing but every thing that came within reach, in this they are prodiges expert."¹²⁶

Cook and his crew were unable to stop the thieving, as Sydney Parkinson regretfully noted in his journal the day after arrival: "A great number of natives came to us, and were very troublesome, attempting to steal every thing they could lay their hands upon."¹²⁷

An incident occurred during Cook's first visit that made a strong impression on some the Englishmen. A Tahitian managed to snatch a musket from the *Endeavour* supplies and run away with it, only to be shot and killed by the men guarding the equipment. The reactions by Sydney Parkinson and Joseph Banks reveal something of their general outlook towards Tahitians. Parkinson was shocked by the incident: "What a pity, that such brutality should be exercised by civilized people upon unarmed ignorant Indians!"¹²⁸ According to Parkinson, Joseph Banks had said of the incident that "if we quarreled with those Indians, we should not agree with angels."¹²⁹ Whether this claim is true or not, Banks was indeed unhappy with the situation: "(...) we retired to the ship, not well pleased with the day's expedition, guilty, no doubt in some measure of the death of a man whom the most severe laws of equity would

¹²⁴ Bougainville, p. 222.

¹²⁵ Bougainville, p. 226.

¹²⁶ Cook, *Endeavour*, p. 77.

¹²⁷ Parkinson, p. 14.

¹²⁸ Parkinson, p. 15.

¹²⁹ Parkinson, p. 15.

not have condemned to so severe a punishment.”¹³⁰ Banks’ embarrassment was perhaps strengthened by the fact that he had earlier observed the natives solving problems of theft among themselves in a manner “at least equal to any one we had seen in civilised countries, exercised by people who have never had any advantage but mere natural interest uninstructed by the example of any civilised country.”¹³¹

The occurrences of theft had not decreased by the time of Cook’s second visit, and was even realistically portrayed in a play set up by the natives on Raiatea¹³², “the only entertaining part of it was a Thift committed by a man and his accomplice, this was done in such a manner as sufficiently displayed the Genius of the people in this art.”¹³³ Cook was constantly pondering how to handle these little acts of crime. On the one hand he did not wish to upset the islanders by punishing them too hard, on the other hand he could not allow the loss of supplies and equipment to happen. It was a delicate situation, one that Cook would handle less elegantly the more time he spent on Tahiti to let his frustrations grow.

Those of a more romantic disposition than Cook were of course disappointed by the constant thieving conducted by a people they otherwise felt inclined to praise and admire. In the words of Anders Sparrman:

“Nothing in the bearing of these people indicated aught but a peaceable and friendly nature. Therefore it is all the more regrettable to record their excessive fondness for pilfering and cheating, and although we had already been warned by our predecessors in these islands and were therefore constantly on our guard, the natives, nevertheless, indulged all too successfully in this propensity.”¹³⁴

Sparrman also touched upon an issue that naturally perplexed the Europeans; the fact that the Tahitians allowed stealing from foreigners but not among themselves, “sometimes imposing the death penalty”.¹³⁵ However, the nature of the stealing was not always of such a serious nature as to warrant harsh punishment, as Sparrman experienced:

“In their company we had the utmost difficulty in preventing them from stealing our handkerchiefs (...) Sometimes, when they had succeeded in filching one of these makeshift handkerchiefs from one of our pockets, they would put it back at once, vastly amused at having robbed us of an article by which they themselves set no store”.¹³⁶

¹³⁰ Banks, p. 78.

¹³¹ Banks, p. 77.

¹³² The second largest of the Society Islands.

¹³³ Cook, *Resolution and Adventure*, p. 224.

¹³⁴ Sparrman, p. 51.

¹³⁵ Sparrman, p. 59.

¹³⁶ Sparrman, p. 59.

Although the English had to admit the constant presence of theft at Tahiti, some of them did their best to downplay its severity. James Burney told of his nights alone “miles up the country, without any attempt being made on me”¹³⁷ and Lieutenant Pickersgill claimed that despite some cases of theft, the crew felt themselves “in perfect ease and safety”¹³⁸ while ashore. The willingness to forgive the Tahitians for this vice was - as in so many other cases - greatest among romanticists like George Forster. Forster went as far as claiming the English should blame the thieving on themselves, “for bringing temptations in their way too powerful to be withstood”.¹³⁹ Not only that, accusing the Tahitians of being criminals would only reveal the double standards of the European ethical outlook, since “vicious characters are to be met with in all societies of men; but for one villain in these isles, we can shew at least fifty in England, or any civilized country.”¹⁴⁰

Occurrences of theft might have become fewer by the latter stages of the period. Visiting Tahiti in the *Pandora* in 1791, George Hamilton claimed that the islanders “are much less addicted to thieving than when Capt. Cook visited them; and when things were stolen, by applying to the magistrate of the district, the goods were immediately returned.”¹⁴¹ The missionaries, arriving a few years later, noted early in their stay on the island that they “had no reason to complain of any improper behaviour in the Otaheitans (...) neither have we lost a single article to our knowledge, though many have unavoidably been much exposed.”¹⁴² Dishonest acts towards visitors might have become fewer, but the missionaries still found thieving to be an integrated part of the Tahitian code of conduct, as a missionary named “Harry” found out. In his effort to find materials for the blacksmith, he asked for King Pomare’s help:

“He carried me up the valley, and searching every house took what he liked: many of the people stoutly resisted, but his men would not leave a plank. I told the king, with whom we exercise the most entire familiarity, that he was a thief. ‘No,’ says he, ‘it is the custom of Otaheite.”¹⁴³

¹³⁷ Burney, p. 73.

¹³⁸ Pickersgill, p. 19.

¹³⁹ G. Forster, p. 188.

¹⁴⁰ G. Forster, p. 210.

¹⁴¹ Hamilton, p. 41.

¹⁴² Wilson, p. 70.

¹⁴³ Wilson, pp. 156-157.

Punishment

How were the Europeans to punish the islanders for their crimes, without losing their goodwill and cooperation? Faced with such a challenging question it is perhaps not much to wonder at that Cook rarely indulged in the romantic musings of his fellow navigators. He tried several tactics during his first visit, especially after witnessing the tragic fate of the musket thief. One strategy was to confiscate items of value to the Tahitians, for instance their canoes. Cook made the threat that he would “burn every one, not that I ever intend to put this in execution, and yet I was very much displeased with them as they they were daily either committing or attempting to commit one theft or other”.¹⁴⁴ Another time, after the desertion of two crewmembers who were probably being hid by the islanders, Cook felt the need to enforce rather extreme measures; he kept the *arees* in custody and would not release them until the whereabouts of the two sailors had been disclosed. In a society where class and kinship was linked to religion, Cook was clearly stepping over the line by imprisoning the sacred *arees*, and he knew it: “Thus we are likely to leave these people in disgust with our behaviour towards them, owing wholly to the folly of two of our own people.”¹⁴⁵

Cook revealed little of the ethical judgements behind his actions toward the Tahitians. His mind was always set on *realpolitik*, to arrive, stay and leave the island on as friendly terms as possible. No matter how much the thieving bothered him, he rarely expressed any condescending thoughts of the Tahitians in general. On the contrary, he made sure to leave the impression in his journals that the thefts were uncharacteristic of the otherwise pleasant Tahitians. On his second visit Cook found that “the temptations were indeed now far greater and occurred oftener”,¹⁴⁶ but he still felt that “one ought not to be too sever upon these people when they do commit a theft since we can hardly charge them with any other Vice.”¹⁴⁷

How did the English view the Tahitian traditions for punishment? As mentioned, the navigators had the impression that the islanders sometimes issued the death penalty for theft committed among themselves. However, there are no accounts of this being carried out, in any of the journals. Overall, the sources are silent when it comes to Tahitians punishing each other for crimes committed, adding to the peaceful and harmonious image of Tahiti. Johann Reinhold Forster admitted he had not seen anyone being punished, but claimed that “thieves

¹⁴⁴ Cook, *Endeavour*, p. 101.

¹⁴⁵ Cook, *Endeavour*, p. 116.

¹⁴⁶ Cook, *Resolution and Adventure*, p. 235.

¹⁴⁷ Cook, *Resolution and Adventure*, p. 236.

were either hanged or drowned with a weight tied to their necks”.¹⁴⁸ It is another example of Forster’s willingness to see the positive side of everything Tahitian, that he added: “in either kind of punishment are no vestiges of cruelty”.¹⁴⁹ One might forgive a sentenced Tahitian awaiting his punishment for not agreeing with Forster.

Both the English reactions to Tahitian stealing and the careful evaluations of how to punish the islanders illustrate how the visitors tried to diminish the negative impressions left by the constant thieving. But, like in all other parts of the world, the native inhabitants would sometimes engage in activities that fit even less into a harmonious paradise image; violence and war.

Violence and war

The first encounter between Tahitians and Europeans was a violent one. Moving from Cook’s concerns about not punishing the islanders too hard, back to the descriptions of the English massacring the islanders with guns and cannonfire in the summer of 1767, is a sharp and contrasted move. “Attempt to say what these poor Ignorant creatures thought of us, would be taking more upon me than I am able to perform”, George Robertson – master of the *Dolphin* – admitted, already signalling some of the patronizing viewpoints that would come to light in future English-Tahitian encounters.

However, after the islanders found that European firepower was something that could not be fought with violence, the “traditional” Tahitian emerged, “traditional” in the sense of fitting into the romanticist notion of a peaceful, amorous creature inhabiting a paradise. A view such as this – obviously false – will naturally lead to a blurring of reality and facts. The Tahitians, like many other Pacific islanders, did at times engage in war, no matter how peaceful and harmonious their native islands might be. Bougainville heard stories of Tahitian warfare:

“They are almost constantly at war with the inhabitants of the neighbouring isles (...) They make war in a very cruel manner. According to Aotourou’s information, they kill all the men and male children taken in battle; they strip the skins, with the beards from the chins, and carry them off as trophies of their victory, only preserving the wives and daughters of their enemies, whom the conquerors do not disdain to admit to their bed.”¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ J.R. Forster, p. 252.

¹⁴⁹ J.R. Forster, p. 252.

¹⁵⁰ Bougainville, p. 253.

It is yet another testament to Bougainville's stubborn insistence on portraying Tahiti as a paradise on earth that these shocking claims of brutality apparently did not influence the rest of his account one bit.

After the initial clash of cultures, incidents of violence between Europeans and Tahitians became fewer, but they did not cease to exist entirely; already during Cook's first visit Joseph Banks reported:

"Mr. Monkhouse, our surgeon, met to-day with an insult from an Indian, the first that has been met with by any of us; he was pulling a flower from a tree which grew on a burial-ground, and was consequently, I suppose, sacred, when an Indian came behind him and struck him"¹⁵¹

However, these occurrences of violence did little to alter the English conviction that the Tahitians were harmless, peaceful beings. Anders Sparrman became the victim of a rather dramatic robbery when he was out on a walk, being beaten, stripped and robbed of some of his belongings. Still, Sparrman held no grudges against the Tahitians at this point (although he would later):

"In fact these people gave us many indisputable proofs of their kindness, goodness, and gentleness of disposition, and I am wholly in accord with Mr. Forster when he declares that in these islands the proportion of good people to rogues is higher than in England or in other equally civilised countries."¹⁵²

The claim that the Tahitians were by nature unsuited for war lasted throughout the period, despite the knowledge that the islanders did in fact engage in wars. James Morrison, one of the *Bounty* mutineers who lived on the island long enough to realise this, even claimed that the Tahitians engaged in war based on "mere trifles; however what we may think a trifle may seem to them of Great Consequence."¹⁵³ Nevertheless, most of the visitors did their best to downplay the warrior-like characteristics of the Tahitians: "In their wars all is over after the first onset, and it does not appear that they take any prisoners of war, or if they do, that they treat them in an inhuman or barbarous manner",¹⁵⁴ Johann Reinhold Forster commented, in stark contrast to Bougainville's descriptions of brutality and murder.

One of many issues of discussion in the polemic debate between George Forster and astronomer William Wales was Forster's claim that the Europeans were solely to blame for

¹⁵¹ Banks, p. 99.

¹⁵² Sparrman, p. 77.

¹⁵³ Morrison, p. 173.

¹⁵⁴ J.R. Forster, p. 252.

the violence that had erupted during the first week after Wallis's discovery. As with many other topics in Forster's *Voyage*, Wales found this claim preposterous:

"The Doctor is always so eager to blame the Europeans, that he will not even give himself time to consider whether his *probabilities* are not *impossibilities*. If he had, he would have found, from Captain Wallis's narrative, that it was totally impossible for the Europeans to have committed any *outrage* whatever, because they had then had no opportunity of doing it."¹⁵⁵

It could be argued, in hindsight, that Wales's comments are the most preposterous. It is clear that the Tahitians were by far the weaker part faced with European guns. But Forster's and Wales's arguments are good examples (yet again) of how differently the character of the islanders could be perceived, based on the romantic or non-romantic dispositions of the perceivers.

Late visitors, such as George Hamilton and George Tobin, shut their eyes to the conflicts and commented that "the soft voluptuous disposition of these people but ill qualifies them for hostile operations, nor do they indeed at all boast of being warlike,"¹⁵⁶ being instead "more versed in the fields of Venus than Mars."¹⁵⁷

Human sacrifice

Few issues were potentially more disruptive to the romantic image of Tahiti than rumors of human sacrifice being carried out on the island. Bougainville reported the first rumors, and Cook could confirm the practice on his second voyage:

"I went one day to a marai¹⁵⁸ in Matavai (...) In the marai laid a Corps upon a Watarau¹⁵⁹ (...) I began with asking questions relating to the several objects before us: if the Plantans etc. were for the Eatua;¹⁶⁰ if they sacrificed to the Eatua Hogs, Dogs, Fowls etc. to all of which he answered in the affirmative. I then asked if they sacrificed men to the Eatua, he answered Taata eno they did, that is bad men, first Taparrahy or beating them till they were dead; I then asked him if good men were put to death in this manner, he answer'd no Taata eno."¹⁶¹

Cook asked several more questions to ensure himself that only "bad men", i.e. criminals, were ever sacrificed, and he was able to accept that "on certain occasions human sacrifices are

¹⁵⁵ G. Forster, p. 711.

¹⁵⁶ Oliver, p. 65.

¹⁵⁷ Hamilton, p. 49.

¹⁵⁸ *marai* or *marae*, serving as sacred places of worship in several Polynesian societies, often rectangular structures placed in a cleared area.

¹⁵⁹ *fatarau*, an altar, according to J.C. Beaglehole.

¹⁶⁰ *eatua*, gods.

¹⁶¹ Cook, *Resolution and Adventure*, p. 233-234.

necessary, when they take such men as have committed crimes worthy of death and such will generally be found amongst the lower class of people.”¹⁶²

While Cook was able to look the other way for the time being, typically enlightened intellectuals such as Johann Reinhold Forster felt an urge to explain the situation further. Forster guessed that the human sacrifices were remnants of an older, more barbaric custom: cannibalism, “with this difference that they now stay and offer the criminals to the Gods, without eating them; whereas they formerly added that inhumanity and barbarism.”¹⁶³ In other words, human sacrifice was a more civilized update of an old barbaric custom, in Forster’s eyes. The fact that only “bad men” were sacrificed also made the custom easier to accept. However, even the romantic Forster had to admit the brutal aspects of the sacrifices:

“(…)debased in the most detestable manner, by leaving the choice of the person, who is to be devoted to the gods to the caprice of the High Priest; who, on this occasion, has an opportunity, not only of indulging his private revenge against any man, by whom he may think himself injured, but also practising at the same time one of the most abominable scenes of priest-craft that ever took place”.¹⁶⁴

Those who had no desire to portray the Tahitians as harmless children of nature, could easily interpret the human sacrifices as a sign of lack of civilization and barbarism. William Anderson, accompanying Cook on the third voyage, did not hold anything back when expressing his view of the sacrifices:

“What could first give rise to a practice so horrid in its own nature and so detrimental to that right of self preservation which every one must be suppos’d to possess at his birth will perhaps admit of some dispute. It would seem however that the true cause of its continuance is the grossest ignorance and superstition, as we hear no more of it in countries where it was formerly practis’d since either the length of time or communication with more civiliz’d nations has wrought a conviction of its impropriety and inhumanity. It is to be regretted that we have here an instance of its still existing, and what is worse it is probably that the practice is extended all over the islands of these seas.”¹⁶⁵

According to Anderson, this brutal custom could not even be attributed to any commendable devotion to religion or spirituality. Watching a human sacrifice taking place, Anderson noted:

“Though a great number of people had collected on this occasion they did not pay the least attention to what was doing during the ceremony, and Omai happening to arrive in the midst of it

¹⁶² Cook, *Resolution and Adventure*, p. 234.

¹⁶³ J.R. Forster, pp. 328-329.

¹⁶⁴ J.R. Forster, pp. 328-329.

¹⁶⁵ James Cook, *The Voyage of the Resolution and Discovery, 1776 – 1780*. Edited by J.C. Beaglehole (Cambridge: Hakluyt Society/University Press, 1967), p. 983.

they flock'd round him and were engag'd the remainder of the time in making him relate some of his adventures, which they listened to with great attention."¹⁶⁶

Even though Captain Cook had initially looked the other way when confronted with the human sacrifices, by the third voyage he had had enough. After witnessing another sacrifice being carried out, Cook let his opinion be heard:

"We made no scruple in giving our sentiments very freely upon it and of Course condemned it. I told the Chief that this Sacrifice was so far from pleasing the Eatua as they intended that he would be angry with them (...) Omai was our spokesman and entered into our arguments with so much Spirit that he put the cheif out of all manner of patience, especially when he was told that if he a Chief in England had put a Man to death as he had done this he would be hanged for it; on this he called out "Maeno maeno" (Vile vile) and would not here a nother word."¹⁶⁷

Despite Cook's disgust, not even at this point did he draw negative conclusions of the kind Anderson did, nor did he try to rationalise this obviously brutal custom. Cook's approach was to deal with the islanders as human beings who could be reasoned with and told of better ways, without forcing anything upon them.

The missionaries were not surprisingly less inclined to make compromises and viewed the sacrifices as one vile custom out of many, which needed to be eradicated immediately. They made a strong appeal to Pomare II to end "such acts of inhumanity; and to give orders that no more human sacrifices should be offered. He replied, he would; said, that Captain Cook told him it should not be done; but did not stay long enough to instruct them."¹⁶⁸ The missionaries made it clear that this was one of the reasons they had come to the island in the first place, to rid the populace of customs contrary to the will of God, and that they would leave if they could not achieve their goals. Pomare was obviously interested in European presence on the island, as he had ambitions to conquer all of Tahiti and the nearby islands, and he saw European assistance as essential. Thus "Pomārrre was evidently affected by what was said, and especially could not bear the thought of our leaving him, and promised he would use all his authority to put an end to these practices."¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁶ Cook, *Resolution and Discovery*, p. 984.

¹⁶⁷ Cook, *Resolution and Discovery*, p. 205

¹⁶⁸ Wilson, pp. 153-154.

¹⁶⁹ Wilson, p. 154.

Infanticide

“They have some very barbarous customs”, complained Second Lieutenant James Burney during Cook’s second voyage, “the worst of which is, when a man has as many children as he is able to maintain, all that come after are smothered”.¹⁷⁰ Infanticide was indeed another disruptive element to the general picture of Tahiti as a happy paradise. This custom is usually attributed only to the *ariori* society, who were not allowed to produce offspring. However, there are several indications in the English journals that this practice was common also among other groups of Tahitian society.

Anders Sparrman, who initially was a dedicated romantic and described the island in extravagant terms only matched by Bougainville, later changed his mind dramatically. One reason for his change was that the “nobles of Otaheite, the illustrious *erioi* (...) have the horrible power to kill children at birth. That is why, with its wars of conquest and its human sacrifices the beautiful land of Otaheite presented such a sad spectacle.”¹⁷¹ The use of the word “nobles” in connection with the *ariori* is a simplification of their role and status in Tahitian society, but their custom of infanticide was real enough. By 1792 the custom had become more common, as George Hamilton noted:

“Between the sacrifices and the ravages of war, a preponderating number of females must have taken place to counteract which, a law passed, that every other female child should be put to death at birth; and the husband always officiating as accoucheur to his wife, the child is destroyed as soon as the sex is discovered.”¹⁷²

According to Hamilton, the effects of the decreasing number of female children were having a damaging effect on Tahitian society:

“The absurdity of this inhuman law is now pretty evident. Women are become more scarce, and set a higher value on their charms, which occasions many desperate battles amongst them. Some with fractured skulls were sent on board of us, which had been got in amorous affrays of that kind.”¹⁷³

Those who reacted the most harshly towards the custom of infanticide were neither the romanticists nor the sceptics, but the missionaries. The Wilson journal contains long passages where the missionaries try to convince the islanders to refrain from killing infants. When a

¹⁷⁰ Burney, p. 73.

¹⁷¹ Sparrman, p. 123.

¹⁷² Hamilton, p. 48.

¹⁷³ Hamilton, p. 48.

certain member of the *arioi*, which the missionaries referred to as a “diabolical society”¹⁷⁴, expressed that he and his pregnant wife would go to another island to kill their child as soon as it was born, the missionaries responded with outrage:

“We thought this a proper opportunity to remonstrate with them against this horrid custom. The mother felt with tenderness, and appeared willing to spare the infant; but the brutal chief continued abstinately bent on his purpose, though he acknowledged it a bloody act, pleading the established custom, his loss of all privileges, and the dissolution of the society, if this should become general. (...) We threatened him, that such an unnatural act would exclude him from our friendship forever, and more that the *Eatōoa*, our god would certainly punish him. He said, if he saw the *arreois* destroyed by the *Eatōoa* for it, he would desist; and asked if their forefathers were suffering from these practices. Our brethren failed not to open to him the wrath of God against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men. On this he walked off dejected, but not apparently determined to desist from the evil or danger of his ways.”¹⁷⁵

With the arrival of the missionaries, the islanders met something quite new and different from both romanticists and enlightened sceptics. Earlier visitors had criticized the islanders from time to time, but rarely had the Tahitians had to face harsh condemnation based on the word of the Christian God. This led to conflicts, despite both sides’ wish to remain on friendly terms, such as when Pomare’s wife *Iddeah* became pregnant and also expressed her wish to kill her child at birth. The missionaries “endeavoured to convince her of the dreadfulness of murder, in a mother especially, and it should be no trouble to her; but she was sullen, and made no reply.”¹⁷⁶ They would later learn that *Iddeah* had murdered her child, and in their outrage they harshly condemned her: “She was highly offended; said she had a right to do with her children as she pleased, and should observe the customs of the country without minding our displeasure.”¹⁷⁷

Staying on the island the missionaries would learn more about infanticide, lending support to the theory that infanticide was not only practiced by the *arioi*. According to the Wilson journal “it is the common practice among all ranks to strangle infants the moment they are born.”¹⁷⁸ After the appearance of a particularly beautiful woman who had murdered her child, the journal suggests a reason for this practice, beyond religious custom:

“She was a good-looking woman, and esteemed by the native a great beauty, which I suppose to be the inducement that tempted her to murder her child; for here the number of women bearing no proportion to the men, those esteemed handsome are courted with great gifts, and get so accustomed to change their husbands, to go with them from place to place, and run after the

¹⁷⁴ Wilson, p. 152.

¹⁷⁵ Wilson, pp. 152-153.

¹⁷⁶ Wilson, p. 153.

¹⁷⁷ Wilson, p. 155.

¹⁷⁸ Wilson, p. 192.

diversions of the island, that rather than be debarred these pleasures, they stifle a parent's feelings, and murder their tender offspring.”¹⁷⁹

Whether this explanation is satisfying or not, it does concur with Hamilton's impression that there had been a great reduction of women on the island, caused by the custom of infanticide.

Infanticide was another aspect of Tahitian society that did not fit well with romanticist expectations. As a result, the practice is significantly more often mentioned in the missionary journals, who had no interest in glossing over the ungodly and heathenist aspects of Tahitian society.

Conclusion

The European visitors to Tahiti were reluctant to condemn any aspect of Tahitian society and tradition that did not directly hinder the business of the navigators in any way. Thus, the problem of theft is much more discussed in the journals than more serious and brutal issues such as human sacrifice and infanticide. Those Europeans who had a great desire to portray Tahiti as a peaceful and serene island to fit into their romantic point of view, were particularly reluctant to let these very real occurrences of violence, theft and brutal practices influence the image of Tahiti they tried to paint in their journals. Thus “the dark sides” of Tahiti were often explained away or seen as deviating from Tahitian society and culture, and not as integral or typical traits. When the missionaries arrived they witnessed acts, customs and practices that shocked them, and which the journals of former visitors had not prepared them for, although these aspects of Tahiti were surely not something entirely new.

Thus one could claim that both the romanticists and sceptics neglected universalism in their ethical outlooks, in favour of viewing the Tahitians as people that should be judged by different guidelines than themselves. The romanticists excused the islanders for committing crimes and acts that would have been seen as immoral back in England, while the critics saw these acts as proof of the innate savagery of the Tahitians.

Art historian Bernard Smith was partly right when he asserted that “soft primitivism” ruled the attitudes towards Tahiti until the arrival of the missionaries¹⁸⁰, but the brutal and immoral aspects of Tahiti – the “hard primitivism” - were acknowledged from the beginning, making Smith's thesis a bit less solid. The two forms of primitivism existed side by side.

¹⁷⁹ Wilson, p. 192.

¹⁸⁰ Smith, *European Vision*, p. 5.

The idea of the the peaceful “noble savage” does not fit well with these reports of theft, violence, infanticide and human sacrifice, but the European need to portray the islanders in a favourable light, and to lessen the negative impact of the reports of uncivilized behaviour, is easily detectable.

5. Tahitian Religion and Society Through European Eyes

The early European visitors to Tahiti encountered a society very different from their own, although they did not always acknowledge it. The European voyagers tended to analyze what they encountered in Western European terms, and one could argue that they had no choice; after all they were encountering new lands and peoples that they had no prerequisites to understand. This was particularly so when the Europeans tried to comprehend the organisation of Tahitian society and the essence of Tahitian religion. This chapter deals with these understandings and misunderstandings. However, this is not an analysis of how Tahitian society *actually was*, as I have argued earlier I believe much of what we could have known about 18th century Tahiti has been lost. What we have left are the journals of European navigators, and it is they who are under scrutiny here. How did the Europeans interpret the society and the religious beliefs they encountered at Tahiti?

To evaluate the noble savage myth is particularly challenging in the context of society and religion. The concept has no religious connotations and does not directly refer to a particular way of organising society. However, as these noble savages are often described as “children of nature”, there is an implicit assumption of a harmonious and equal society organised along very simple guidelines. Is this image compatible with what the British navigators reported from Tahiti?

Religion

Scholars agree that religion was part and parcel of how Polynesian societies were organized at the time of European contact.¹⁸¹ However, the first travellers to the island did not always see it this way. The early accounts and journals present a confusing array of interpretations and assertions. Arriving with the *Dolphin* in 1767, George Robertson soon expressed an interest in figuring out the mysteries of Tahitian religion. After the initial hostilities ended, which had led some of Robertson’s messmates to assume that the islanders “would now look upon us as Demi Gods, come to punish them for some of their by past transgrations”¹⁸², Robertson carried out some “experiments” to test the Tahitians. He placed the *Dolphin*’s pennant on the beach, and in hiding he observed how some of the islanders approached the strange object

¹⁸¹ E.g. I. C. Campbell, *A History of the Pacific Islands* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 16-18.

¹⁸² Robertson, p. 156.

with a mix of fear and amazement.¹⁸³ After conducting the same experiment with a dead shark, Robertson was convinced that the awestruck and almost ceremonial reaction the islanders had shown was a sign of religious veneration.¹⁸⁴

A few years later, Louis-Antoine de Bougainville tried to learn something of Tahitian religious beliefs by questioning Aotourou, the Tahitian Bougainville had brought with him back to France. From what Aotourou said, Bougainville made some assessments:

“His countrymen are very superstitious; that the priests have the highest authority amongst them; that besides a superior being, named *Eri-t-Era*, king of the sun or light, and whom they do not represent by any material image, they have several divinities; some beneficent, others mischievous; that the name of these divinities or genii is *Eatoua*; that they suppose, that at each important action of human life, there presides a good and an evil genius; and that they decide its good or bad success. What we understand in certainty is, that when the moon has a certain aspect, which they call *Malama Tamai* or moon in state of war, (an aspect in which we have not been able to distinguish any characteristic mark, by which it could be defined) they sacrifice human victims.”¹⁸⁵

However, Bougainville was not willing to put too much emphasis on what he learned from Aotourou, the Frenchman was always more interested in his own mythmaking than to analyze Tahitian religion. He concluded that, after all, one had to take what Aotourou told about his religion with a pinch of salt: “Upon the whole, scepticism is reasonable, especially when we treat of the religion of different nations; as there is no subject in which it is more easy to be deceived by appearances.”¹⁸⁶

Little or nothing of what the the English of the *Dolphin* or Bougainville had learned of Tahitian religion was passed on to James Cook and his companions of the *Endeavour*, dropping anchor at Tahiti in 1769. Only after witnessing the ceremonial treatment of a dead musket thief¹⁸⁷ did Cook get a hunch that the islanders believed in a “Supreme Being”.¹⁸⁸ Like Bougainville, Cook did not expect to ever understand the essence of this supreme being or the beliefs surrounding it, “for the Misteries of most Religions are very dark and not easily understud even by those who profess them,”¹⁸⁹ and indeed, by the end of his stay Cook

¹⁸³ Robertson, pp. 161-162.

¹⁸⁴ Robertson, p. 176.

¹⁸⁵ Bougainville, pp. 255-256.

¹⁸⁶ Bougainville, p. 256.

¹⁸⁷ See Chapter 4.

¹⁸⁸ Cook, *Endeavour*, pp. 83-34.

¹⁸⁹ Cook, *Endeavour*, pp. 83-34.

grudgingly admitted that “it will be expected that I should give some account of their Religion, which is a thing I have learnt so little of that I hardly dare touch upon it”.¹⁹⁰

Joseph Banks, accompanying Cook in the *Endeavour*, went so far as to suggest the non-existence of religion at the island. “We have not yet seen the least traces of religion among these people, maybe they are entirely without it,”¹⁹¹ he speculated at an early point during his stay. Banks was a true sceptic when it came to religious matters, and would soon be disappointed to discover that religion and superstitious traditions did prevail at Tahiti. The islanders had a “fault which is too frequent even among the most civilized nations. I mean an invincible attachment to the customs which they have learned from their forefathers.”¹⁹² As a follow-up to this realisation, Banks made an attempt at explaining the general need for religion among peoples, and how Tahitian religion failed in one important aspect :

“This universe and its marvellous parts must strike the most stupid with a desire of knowing from whence they themselves and it were produced; their priests, however, have not ideas sufficiently enlarged to adopt that of creation. That this world should have been originally created from nothing far surpasses their comprehension.”¹⁹³

Banks’s distrust of religion led him to the rather surprising conclusion that Tahitian religion was “totally independent of morality.”¹⁹⁴ This view was based on his impression of the Tahitian concepts of heaven and hell; where each individual ended up after death was determined not by his actions in life, but which class or societal group he belonged to:

“Heaven they describe as a place of great happiness, while hell is only a place enjoying less of the luxuries of life: to this, they say, the souls of the inferior people go after death, and those of the chiefs and rich men go to heaven.”¹⁹⁵

The confused European perceptions of Tahitian religion had not lessened by the time of Cook’s second voyage. William Wales’s speculations that “they believe there is one Supreme Being; but whether they think it Necessary to pay him any sort of Adoration I could not discover”¹⁹⁶, indicate that the issue of Tahitian religion could not have been discussed much during the voyage, at least not when Wales was present.

¹⁹⁰ Cook, *Endeavour*, p. 134.

¹⁹¹ Banks, p. 92.

¹⁹² Banks, p. 145.

¹⁹³ Banks, pp .172-173.

¹⁹⁴ Banks, p. 173.

¹⁹⁵ Banks, p. 173.

¹⁹⁶ Cook, *Resolution & Adventure*, p. 795.

The romanticists also made their contributions to the confusion. While Anders Sparrman was still in South Sea euphoria he wrote down his reflections regarding Bougainville's mythological naming of Tahiti. Bougainville had often attempted to connect Tahiti with Greek mythology, including referring to the island as "Cythera" after the Greek island of the same name, playing an important mythological role as the realm of Aphrodite, the Goddess of Love. The romantic Sparrman was easily enchanted by Bougainville's writings and wanted to confirm their viability. "Cythera, or the island of the Goddess of Love, a name, which albeit ambiguous is, indeed, most suitable,"¹⁹⁷ he asserted. Bougainville usually referred to the goddess of love by her Roman name – Venus – and tried to establish the idea that this goddess "ruled" Tahiti and its amorous inhabitants. Of course, the islanders themselves had never heard of neither Aphrodite or Venus and worshipped gods that had nothing to do with Greek mythology. It is therefore surprising to discover that Sparrman - a devotee to science and reason - made the mistake of accepting Bougainville's romantic meditations as part of the actual Tahitian religious system. Based on Bougainville's journal, Sparrman wrote about the goddess of love as if she was being worshipped by the Tahitians: "According to the rites of this goddess, many sacrifices had been made here upon her altar and Matavai¹⁹⁸ is certainly of all places the most appropriate for the erection of a temple to Love."¹⁹⁹ Sparrman might have only been fantasizing, but the fact that these ideas ended up in his published account of Tahiti is a telling example of how romantic outlooks could garble the reports from Tahiti in the early years.

Even Johann Reinhold Forster - who was usually thorough in his descriptions of the Pacific islanders – did not try to penetrate Tahitian religion particularly deeply. He acknowledged the religiosity of the islanders, but instead of analyzing it he used it as an example of Tahiti's undeveloped state, in a paragraph that contrasted with his usually praising attitude towards most aspects of Tahitian life:

"The people at Taheitee preserve their notions relative to the Deity and his worship by tradition, and are as yet unable to investigate the necessity of the existence of God, the nature of his attributes, and the duties they owe him by reason; they are therefore still in the infant state of humanity, not yet ripened to the use of argument and reason in religious matters."²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁷ Sparrman, p. 62.

¹⁹⁸ Matavai – the bay where most of the early European visited dropped anchor.

¹⁹⁹ Sparrman, p. 62.

²⁰⁰ J.R. Forster, p. 323.

James Morrison, mutineer of the *Bounty*, offered one of the most thorough accounts of Tahitian religion of all the early European visitors, even claiming that the Tahitian devotion to their religion was of a magnitude that would have made it an honor to Christianity.²⁰¹ Despite Morrison's thoroughness, perceptions of Tahitian religion were still muddled at the end of the period. George Hamilton of the *Pandora* (arriving in 1791) made an attempt to describe it, declaring his ignorance in the process:

“As to the religion of this country, it is difficult for me to define it. Their tenets, although equally ignorant of heathen mythology or theological intricacies, seem to partake of both; and, like other nations, in the early ages of society, are rendered subservient to political purposes, as by the machinery of deification, the person of the king is sacred and inviolable.”²⁰²

The missionaries, arriving in 1797, made no attempts to analyze or comprehend the native religion. Their business was to swiftly convert the islanders to Christianity, and whatever set of beliefs may originally have inhabited the minds of their subjects was of little interest to the missionaries. The Wilson journal is full of complaints and disgust regarding local customs - particularly those connected to sexuality - but these were rarely seen in a context of religion, but rather as manifestations of the Tahitians' barbaric and ungodly character.

The most striking impression left from the confusing reports of Tahitian religion is of European visitors with a great degree of religious individuality and with little desire to condemn or lecture the islanders on religious matters. At the time of the discovery of Tahiti, religion was not a matter of the utmost importance to the European navigators. The constructed noble savage concept has no direct religious associations either, although Roy Porter asserts that “Deists might fantasize that [the children of nature] displayed an intuitive knowledge of the Supreme Being” in context of what Porter calls the “noble savage cult”.²⁰³ True, some of the European visitors to Tahiti speculated that the islanders believed in a supreme being and added some thoughts about the nature of this belief. But never did they view the Tahitians as being in possession of some greater truth or metaphysical insight that could compete with their own Western tenets.

²⁰¹ Morrison, p. 178.

²⁰² Hamilton, pp. 46-47.

²⁰³ Porter, p. 358.

Tahitian society: Hierarchy, class and property

The structure and stratification of Tahitian society was another point of confusion for the European visitors. Despite Bougainville's romantic outlook he hesitantly concluded that he had been wrong when claiming that the happiness of the islanders partly emanated from the lack of any kind of hierarchy on the island. On the contrary, Bougainville found that "the distinctions of ranks is very great at Tahiti, and the disproportion very tyrannical. The kings and grandees have power of life and death over their servants and slaves".²⁰⁴ According to Bougainville, the common class was subjected to a particularly brutal custom: "So much is certain, that the victims of human sacrifices are taken from this class of people."²⁰⁵

Joseph Banks was one of the first to put forward a common notion; that Tahitian society resembled the feudal society of medieval Europe. But "feudalism" is an ambiguous term, and it is clear that Banks and others did not refer to a system of lords, vassals and fiefs when they used the term "feudal" to describe Tahitian society, but rather a general sense of a system of unfair hierarchies. As Banks put it:

"The subordination which takes place among them very much resembles the early state of the feudal laws, by which our ancestors were so long governed, a system evidently formed to secure the licentious liberty of a few, while the greater part of the society unalterably immersed in the most abject slavery."²⁰⁶

James Cook agreed with Bank's assessment that Tahiti was "feudal", but he also felt it had "sufficient Stability and [was] by no means badly constituted".²⁰⁷ Cook was also impressed by the conduct and dignity of the rulers, particularly the down-to-earth demeanor of the *aree* Otoo:

"Notwithstanding this kind of Kingly Establishment, there is very little about Otoo's person or Court, by which a Stranger could distinguish the King from the Subject. I have seldom seen him dressed in any thing but a Common piece of Cloth wrapped round his loins, so that he seems to pay the same homage to his Subjects which is due to him from them; he seems to avoid all unnecessary pomp and shew and even to demean himself, more than any other of the Earee's".²⁰⁸

It is not surprising that the Europeans reached for familiar terms and concepts when trying to understand Tahiti, but in the end their attempt was not particularly productive. True, the

²⁰⁴ Bougainville, p. 269.

²⁰⁵ Bougainville, p. 269.

²⁰⁶ Banks, p. 176.

²⁰⁷ Cook, *Resolution and Adventure*, p. 410.

²⁰⁸ Cook, *Resolution and Adventure*, p. 410.

Europeans could recognize a hierarchy at Tahiti - with paramount chiefs ruling lesser ones²⁰⁹ - which could be compared to several forms of European government. But what was often overlooked was how greatly the organisation of Tahitian society was embossed by religion. Children were sacred from their birth and had to go through a process of profaning.²¹⁰ The chiefs were also sacred, and their powers went beyond that of distributing wealth and securing law and order; they had the ability to impose *taboos* on places or objects. Another difference between Europe and Tahiti, despite the existence of hierarchies in both places, was that the material differences between the “classes” were in Tahiti only symbolic.²¹¹ Not only that, there existed no currency on Tahiti and thus no real “economy” of the European kind. All transactions were based on the giving of gifts.²¹²

In fact, one of the most striking peculiarities of the organisation of Tahitian society was the existence of a class that had no resembling counter-part in Europe. These were the *arioi*; “entertainers, providers of the most lewd dancing, and practised total sexual licence among themselves”²¹³, as Trevor Lummis puts it. They did not work or own property, but had a religious significance through their songs and dances of worship, and in war their existence was important to assert the authority of the chief.²¹⁴ The *arioi* are often discussed and criticized in the European journals, particularly owing to their tradition of killing children at birth (discussed in Chapter 4).

Not only are the comparisons to Europe dubious, Bougainville’s description of the “tyrannical hierarchy” is also questionable. Naturalist George Forster discovered something different entirely, that “at Taheitee there is not, in general, that disparity between the highest and the meanest man, which subsists in England between a reputable tradesman and a labourer.”²¹⁵ In addition, the young Forster noticed a great affectation for the chiefs among the islanders. George’s father Johann Reinhold Forster attempted to explain this fact by pointing at the Tahitian emphasis on the importance of a tightly knit family, teaching their children to love and respect their father from an early age “and thus a society gradually

²⁰⁹ Trevor Lummis, *Pitcairn Island. Life and Death in Eden* (Ashgate Publishing Company, 1997), p. 21.

²¹⁰ Lummis, *Pitcairn Isl.*, p. 26.

²¹¹ Lummis, *Pitcairn Isl.*, p. 24.

²¹² Denoon, p. 141.

²¹³ Lummis, *Pitcairn Isl.*, pp. 28-29.

²¹⁴ Lummis, *Pitcairn Isl.*, p. 29.

²¹⁵ G. Forster, p. 199.

accustom themselves to look upon their chiefs with reverence, and accept the posterity of an equitable, benevolent leader, for their hereditary chief.”²¹⁶

Despite both his and his father’s descriptions of Tahiti’s harmonious political system, George Forster felt that this situation could not last. His prediction of how Tahiti would evolve is one of the most peculiar reflections made by any visitor to Tahiti. According to the young Forster, Tahiti’s stable and happy situation would inevitably change “since the indolence of the chiefs is already, notwithstanding the exuberant fertility of the soil, a step towards its destruction”.²¹⁷ What Forster envisioned was that agriculture would become a much more important factor on the island, with tremendous consequences for the population. The common people would be the ones who would carry the burden of this change: “This addition of labour will have a bad effect on their bodies, they will grow ill-shaped, and their bones become marrowless: their greater exposure to the action of a vertical sun, will blacken their skins, and they will dwindle away to dwarfs.”²¹⁸ The chiefly class, on the other hand, would experience quite the opposite:

“That pampered race, on the contrary, will preserve all the advantages of an extraordinary size, of a superior elegance of form and features, and of a purer colour, by indulging a voracious appetite, and living in absolute idleness.”²¹⁹

It was clear to Forster that the co-existence of the dwarves and the fat chiefs would result in conflict: “At last the common people will perceive these grievances, and the causes which produced them; and a proper sense of the general rights of mankind awaking in them, will bring on a revolution.” Forster’s prediction might seem both strange and sensational, but one must consider that the young Forster would later partake in revolutionary activities both in his native Germany and in France.²²⁰ He used Tahiti as a tool to promote his revolutionary viewpoints, and insisted that “this is the natural circle of human affairs,”²²¹ a prime example of how Europeans could arrive at Tahiti and mold what they encountered into a different shape than it really had.

George Forster was the quintessential enlightened romanticist. To him, the influence of Europeans would expedite this inevitable negative development he foresaw, and thus one

²¹⁶ J.R. Forster, pp. 224-225.

²¹⁷ G. Forster, p. 199.

²¹⁸ G. Forster, p. 199.

²¹⁹ G. Forster, pp. 199-200.

²²⁰ Howgego, p. 394.

²²¹ G. Forster, p. 200.

should perhaps sacrifice some of the scientific advantages that might be gained, and leave the islanders alone:

”If the knowledge of a few individuals can only be acquired at such a price as the happiness of nations, it were better for the discoverers, and the discovered, that the South Sea had still remained unknown to Europe and its restless inhabitants.”²²²

Most visitors to Tahiti did not share Forster’s pessimistic predictions, including the other romanticists. George Hamilton of the *Pandora* praised Tahiti in much the same manner as Forster, except that he already saw Tahiti as a harmonious, classless society, in no need of a revolution:

“A native of this country divides every thing in common with his friend, and the extent of the word friend, by them, is only bounded by the universe, and was he reduced to his last morsel of bread, he cheerfully halves it with him; the next that comes has the same claim, if he wants it, and so in succession to the last mouthful he has. Rank makes no distinction in hospitality; for the king and beggar relieve each other in common.”²²³

A yardstick often used by the English to measure the degree of civilization at Tahiti was the existence or non-existence of private property. Two of the earliest visitors to Tahiti, George Robertson of the *Dolphin* and Bougainville had completely different opinions on the matter. Bougainville did not spend much time pondering the subject and merely noted that the islanders had “no personal property amongst them”.²²⁴ Robertson, on the other hand, had an experience that indicated differently. One of the englishmen had purchased a tree, and two of the islanders were engaged in an argument over who was the original owner of the tree, when a woman of authority appeared and solved the matter. To Robertson, this “plainly demonstrates that there is both Justice, and Property in this happy Island.”²²⁵

James Cook, who had read Bougainville’s account, concluded after his second voyage that the Frenchman had been wrong on the issue of property, accusing the Frenchman of being overly romantic on this as on several other issues:

“That ‘every one gather fruit from the first tree he meets with or takes some in any house on to which he enters’; he likewise seems to think there is no personal property among them. So far from it being so, that I much doubt if there is a fruit tree on the whole island that is not the property of some individual in it.”²²⁶

²²² G. Forster, p. 200.

²²³ Hamilton, p. 38.

²²⁴ Bougainville, p. 252.

²²⁵ Robertson, p. 187.

²²⁶ Cook, *Resolution and Adventure*, p. 235.

During the same visit, astronomer William Wales analyzed the situation a bit differently. He saw no signs of land being owned by anyone, but “it appeared to me that the property of the land was rather determined by the Trees which were Planted on it than that of the Trees by the Lands whereon they were planted, as in England.”²²⁷

If one of the components of the noble savage myth is a romantic glorification of how the savages lived, it is hard to see any connection between the myth and the European impression of the organisation of Tahitian society. The visitors did their best to comprehend Tahiti in European terms, comparing its societal structure with feudalism or other Western forms of government. There were those, like George Forster and George Hamilton, who viewed Tahitian society as a classless and harmonious society, but the general impression was that one could find striking similarities between European and Tahitian forms of government, for better or worse.

Conclusion

The early European accounts of Tahitian religion and society remained obscured and confusing throughout the period. Several causes can be attributed to this fact. Concerning Tahitian religion, the early European visitors were little interested in penetrating the religious beliefs of the islanders. Enlightened Britain was experiencing a secularization, but not an outright rejection of religion. In the words of Roy Porter, “belief was becoming a matter of private judgement, for individual reason to adjudicate within the multi-religionism sanctioned by statutory toleration”.²²⁸ The English journals are conspicuous in their lack of emphasis on religious matters. The sceptics dismissed it as superstition, while the romanticists were much too busy delving into the enchanting and paradisiacal aspects of Tahiti. Even the missionaries, who came to Tahiti to convert the heathen islanders, did not focus on understanding the religious beliefs of their subjects. Instead, they concentrated on making the islanders stop practices the missionaries saw as “vices” and generally had enough of a challenge just to make the Tahitians listen to the word of the New God.

The English journals do offer *some* insight into Tahitian religion, for example in identifying various deities and their roles. But when faced with the challenge of analyzing the

²²⁷ Cook, *Resolution and Adventure*, pp. 795-796.

²²⁸ Porter, p. 99.

organisation of Tahitian society, the European accounts are even less reliable than on the subject of religion. The journals often contain half-hearted attempts at describing Tahitian society in European terms; labeling Tahiti as a society of strict hierarchies or “feudalism”, that might or might not incorporate the idea of private property. The realities of Tahitian society were in all probability more complex than the European visitors realized and undoubtedly different from both the situation in 18th century Britain and medieval Europe, particularly in the way hierarchies, traditions and norms were strongly infused with a religion very different from Christianity. The European journals rarely saw Tahitian religion and society as a whole.

The European difficulties at offering a reliable and comprehensive account of Tahitian society and religion illustrates how enlightened intellectuals - both sceptics and romanticists - still were far from viewing non-western peoples along the same standards as themselves. Even the accounts written by the Forsters - George and Johann Reinhold - which are generally regarded as being among the most valuable and comprehensive accounts of Pacific peoples at this early stage, are significantly tainted by their romantic agendas.

Despite the romantic outlooks among the European visitors, one can hardly claim that either Tahitian religion or form of government was glorified or held up as an example of the superiority of “noble savages”. The lackluster attempts at describing Tahitian religion and comparing Tahitian society with Western forms of government are indicators that if the Europeans did in fact believe in a Noble Savage, they had little or no idea how he preferred to live or what he believed in.

6. Savages, Europeans and the Tahitian Character

Of crucial importance to the European enlightenment was the insistence that human beings should become educated and trained to improve their reason, logic and ethics, particularly based on ideas left over from the scientific and intellectual revolution of the seventeenth century. Thus European philosophers and scientists were faced with a difficult challenge when they were confronted with non-European peoples who had never had the chance to read the works of Descartes, Newton, Voltaire or Locke, or indeed ever set foot in a library. The fact that these peoples worshipped pagan gods and had archaic forms of government only made the situation more complicated.²²⁹

The concepts of savagery and enlightenment were constantly put up against each other in the journals of the European navigators. The Europeans put forth several different views on what it meant to be a “savage”, if the Tahitians rightfully belonged to the category, and if so, if that made the “savages” inferior to the “enlightened” Europeans. Of particular importance among these confusing reflections was the effort to define the Tahitian *character* and - if possible - compare it to the European character. Needless to say, these questions are essential in our quest to locate a belief in the Noble Savage. Implicit in the claim that this belief existed is the idea of a savage way of life superior – or at least serving as a viable alternative - to life in modern Europe. We have searched for the noble savages through various themes found in the European journals, but where better to look than at the search for the Tahitian character? Was the inherent character of the islanders glorified by the Europeans?

As discussed throughout this thesis, the Europeans often had preconceived notions about Tahiti and its inhabitants, and the search to define who the Tahitians were and how they stood up compared to Europeans were particularly important to the romanticists. All the sexual promiscuity and dreamlike existence of the Tahitians set aside, chances were it would be their character and their viability in a modern world that would eventually either acquit or sentence the islanders in the Enlightenment courtroom.

²²⁹ Porter, pp. 354-363.

The Savages vs. the Enlightened

George Robertson's journal reveals several examples of viewing the Tahitians as inferior creatures, but also a willingness to appreciate them as people with human thoughts and feelings. Robertson describes the massacre of the islanders carried out by the *Dolphin* crew, without revealing much regret. But after the hostilities ended, he had to admit that their actions would probably cause the islanders to hate rather than respect the Europeans.²³⁰ After the change of tactics from both sides, the English received supplies from the islanders, who now had a friendlier attitude. Robertson concluded that "this was entirely owing to the treatment we gave the Natives, who it's reasonable to think had some Sense of Good and bad ways as we."²³¹

A problem that often occurred when Europeans contemplated the ways of the Savage opposed to the enlightened European was the idea that the savages might in fact be better off. The illustrator on Cook's first voyage, Sydney Parkinson, was one of the first to suggest this. Parkinson noted that the islanders did not have any locks on the doors of their huts, which led him onto an interesting and ultimately disturbing reflection:

"Locks, bolts, and bars, are peculiar to civilized countries, where their moral theory is the best, and their moral practices too generally the worst; which might induce a celebrated writer²³² to conclude, though erroneously, that mankind, upon the whole, are necessarily rendered worse, and less happy, by civilization, and the cultivation of the arts and sciences."²³³

Despite his unwillingness to agree with this assessment, Parkinson led himself into at least partly accepting the contention that uncivilized peoples might have some unique qualities:

"Nature's wants, it is true, are but few, and the uncivilized part of mankind, in general, seem contented if they can acquire those few. (...) They have, in general, less anxious thought for the morrow, than civilized; and therefore feel more enjoyment while they partake of heaven's bounty in the present day."²³⁴

Parkinson also noted that the Tahitians were "in constitution what the ancient Britons were before their civilization."²³⁵ If the islanders lived in harmony with nature during a golden age,

²³⁰ Robertson, p. 156.

²³¹ Robertson, p. 174.

²³² Parkinson might have been referring to Rousseau here.

²³³ Parkinson, p. 23.

²³⁴ Parkinson, p. 23.

²³⁵ Parkinson, p. 23.

a romantic Briton could easily extend this view to the belief that this was how his forefathers must have lived.

During Cook's second voyage, Johann Reinhold Forster added a solid addition to the view that the people of Tahiti might be superior to Europeans. In his praise of the islanders, Forster also felt a sting of shame on behalf of his fellow Europeans:

"Still my heart was filled with tender affliction, and my eyes overflowed with tears of genuine sorrow, when I perceived that our own civilized countries, notwithstanding the numberless improvements they had received from the establishment of excellent laws, and the cultivation of arts and sciences; notwithstanding the frequent occasions of still greater improvement, and the glorious encouragement to virtue and morality, were far outdone in real goodness and benevolence by a set of innocent people, so much our inferiors in many other respects; and I could not help repeatedly wishing, that our civilized Europeans might add to their many advantages, that innocence of heart and genuine simplicity of manners, that spirit of benevolence, and real goodness, which these my new acquired friends so eminently possessed".²³⁶

Forster yearned for a new beginning. From his both enlightened and romantic viewpoint, he felt something had been lost in the evolution of the Western civilization. The Europeans were obviously benefiting from their magnificent progress in arts, science and economics, but the moral and human aspects had suffered. To Forster, Tahiti could be the ultimate starting point for a true enlightened paradise, where the best products of Western society could merge with the spirit and happiness of the Tahitians, to form a superior modern civilization. There might exist objections to certain aspects of Tahitian society, particularly concerning the role and position of women. But in Forster's eyes, previous "savage" problems as these had now all but disappeared, evidence of the non-barbaric state of the island:

"In O-Taheitee (...) the fair sex is already raised to a greater equality with the men; and if, from no other reason, from this alone we might be allowed to pronounce, that these islanders have emerged from the state of savages, and ought to be ranked one remove above barbarians."²³⁷

Johann's son George expanded the ideas of his father in his account of their voyage. After contemplating the friendly and non-violent disposition of the islanders, and particularly the lack of mistrust and hostility in the wake of the *Dolphin* incident, he reached a profound conclusion:

²³⁶ J.R. Forster, p. 223.

²³⁷ J.R. Forster, p. 260.

“It must surely be a comfortable reflection to every sensible mind, that philanthropy seems to be natural to mankind, and that the savage ideas of distrust, malevolence, and revenge, are only the consequences of a gradual depravation of manners. There are few instances where people, who are not absolutely sunk to a state of barbarism, have acted contrary to this general peacable principle.”²³⁸

It is hard to think of a greater compliment to the islanders - or a more romantic one - than the assertion that the Tahitians were proof of the innate goodness of mankind. Forster did not rule out the existence of barbarism among peoples, but at Tahiti and the Society Islands he had found the native population - who were inferior to Europeans in technology and education - to be arguably superior in simple humaneness and morals. Upon his departure from the islands, a moved Forster bid farewell to his extraordinary new friends and added extra emotional weight to his descriptions:

“Our friends parted from us, with the sincerest expressions of grief, and shedding floods of tears, reproached some of us with a want of sensibility. Our civilized education in general tends to stifle the emotions of our heart; for as we are too often taught to be ashamed of them, we unhappily conquer them by custom. On the contrary, the simple child of nature, who inhabits these islands, gives free course to all his feelings, and glories in his affection towards the fellow-creature.”²³⁹

In his longing for human feelings, Forster maintained the division between Civilized Man and the “simple child of nature”, a typical paradox found in the journals of European voyagers sharing Forster’s romantic disposition. In the end one could accuse the romanticists for having dubious motives; their longing was not first and foremost directed at the struggle for the equality of men, but at their own urge to free themselves from the coldness of modern Europe and to catch a glimpse of the natural bliss of an exotic island.

Perhaps a more sober observation by a less educated type than the Forsters could be in place here. Also accompanying Cook on his second voyage was Lieutenant Richard Pickersgill, who added his thoughts to the claim of Tahitian moral superiority, although his observation was less based on snobbish romanticism than on a particular experience he had on the island. At one moment during his stay, Pickersgill was wading through a river and quickly found both himself and his clothes soaked in water. He climbed into a canoe and was soon accompanied by the *arii* Ereti: “As soon as he came into the Boat he striped himself and making me do the same he wrapped up my wet cloaths and clothed me in his dry ones – here

²³⁸ G. Forster, pp. 176-177.

²³⁹ G. Forster, p. 226.

Europeans! Learn humanity and civility to distressed strangers, from men who most of you terms Barbarous Nations.”²⁴⁰

Both Forster and Pickergill’s statements resemble that of the noble savage myth. On Tahiti they had found a people who might seem inferior to Europeans in several ways, but when it came to morals and dignity they were in a league of their own.

James Cook engaged little in debating the differences between Europeans and Tahitians. However, during his third voyage he did reflect on the possibility of European settlement in the Society Islands, after learning of the failed attempt by the Spanish missionaries. His conclusion was not favourable to European influence:

“This shews with what facility a settlement properly conducted might be made among them, which for the regard I have for them I hope will never happen; indeed it is no ways likely as there is no inducement that I can see.”²⁴¹

In retrospect we might wish that Cook had been more specific as to why he wished to spare the Tahitians from European settlement, and what “inducements” might be sufficient to justify it. Ultimately he was wrong in his predictions, and his wish was not fulfilled. Tahiti was eventually exposed to both European settlement, religion and diseases.

William Bligh, looking back at the mutiny on his *Bounty*, had no doubt that the crew had included a comparison between Europe and Tahiti in their decision to revolt: “I can only conjecture that the mutineers had assured themselves of a more happy life among the Otaheiteans, than they could possibly have in England; which, joined to some female connections, have most probably been the principal cause of the whole transaction”. Of course, “a happy life among the Otaheitans” may refer to much more than their superior friendliness and humaneness, but mutineer James Morrison did include criticism of his fellow Europeans on these issues, while praising the Tahitian character:

“They all prefer the having to give than being forced to receive – and when they make a present, it is so freely done and so graceful that Christianity may blush at the action and be ashamed to be surpass’d by those whom we call Savages.”²⁴²

George Hamilton, surgeon of the *Pandora*, lent his support to the claim that there was a clear difference between the islanders and the Europeans. After seeing the effects of the venereal

²⁴⁰ Elliott & Pickersgill, p. 81.

²⁴¹ Cook, *Resolution and Discovery*, p. 224.

²⁴² Morrison, p. 174.

disease on the island (brought there by Europeans), Hamilton called out to his fellow countrymen:

“The voice of humanity, honour, and justice, calls upon us as a nation to remedy those evils, by sending some intelligent surgeon to live amongst them. They at present pant for the pruning-hand of civilization and the arts, love and adore us as beings of a superior nature, but gently upbraid us with having left them in the same abject state they were at first discovered.”²⁴³

Hamilton admired the islanders, but reminiscent of George Forster’s “simple children of nature”, he felt a responsibility on behalf of his civilized peers to help these innocent creatures, who were sadly not able to help themselves. Also, from Hamilton’s statement it is clear that he assumed the Tahitians felt inferior to the Europeans.

William Bligh hoped the islanders would learn from their superior European visitors, but visiting the island for his second breadfruit voyage he was clearly disappointed, not by the islanders but by the Europeans visiting the island since the *Bounty*:

“Our Friends here have benefited very little from the intercourse they have had with Europeans since I left them. Our Countrymen must have taken great pains to have taught them such vile & blackguard expressions as are in the Mouth of every Otaheitean. I declare I would rather forfeit any thing than to have been in the list of Ships that have touched here since April 1789.”²⁴⁴

George Vancouver - visiting the island shortly after Bligh – viewed the situation more favourable, focusing instead on “the great desire which the generality of them, both male and female, exhibited, in their endeavours to adopt our manners and customs.”²⁴⁵

Proving that the islanders were in many ways superior to Europeans - not in technology, but in morals, humaneness and happiness – was one of the primary aims of the romanticist agenda. In these comparisons we may find something resembling that which has been called the noble savage myth; a belief that something about indigenous peoples and their way of life made them superior to Europeans. But to really evaluate this assessment in reference to Tahiti we must look closer at what exactly the word “Tahitian” meant to the European visitors and their search to find the essence of the Tahitian character, European influence set aside.

²⁴³ Hamilton, p. 55.

²⁴⁴ Oliver, p. 62.

²⁴⁵ Vancouver, p. 400.

The Tahitian Character

Much of what has so far been discussed in this thesis has necessarily been evaluations of the islanders; their physical appearance, habits, morals, sexuality, etc. But it could be useful to take a closer look at the direct evaluations of the Tahitian *character* that can be found in the sources. What did it mean to be Tahitian, from an European point of view?

Let us begin with a particular evening during the *Dolphin's* stay at the island in 1767. After the initial hostilities had ended, Master George Robertson was beginning to view the islanders in a favourable light, and his account of dining with a native called "Jonathan"²⁴⁶ adds both amusing and useful insight into the first contact between Europeans and Tahitians. Captain Wallis and Master Robertson understood Jonathan to be a chief and thus invited him onboard the *Dolphin*, where he "took very particular notice of every thing which we showed him, and seemd greatly surprized at the construction of our ship"²⁴⁷ They then offered Jonathan to dine with the officers. In his account of the following dinner, Robertson expresses a remarkable eagerness to make the Tahitian guest feel comfortable and at ease, despite Jonathan's complete ignorance of British dining etiquette and eating utensils, which particularly disgusted an officer named "Mr. Clark."²⁴⁸ When Jonathan seemed uneasy at the prospect of using a handkerchief, Robertson quickly discarded etiquette in favour of making his guest feel comfortable:

"I gave him the corner of the table cloath to wipe his mouth, which so shoked the delicate Mr Clark that he could neather eat nor drink any more at that time, but keep growling at the cheiff and me for being so very undelicate all the time we sit at dinner."²⁴⁹

Mr Clark did not give up that easily:

"He took up the cloath several times, and Endeavourd to make the man understand how unpolite it was to use the cloath, this made the man unhappy for some time, as he could not comprehend his meaning he still thought he hade don something very bad which began to make me some uneasy knowing my self to be the Original author of this man's trouble."²⁵⁰

In a foreshadowing turn of events, Jonathan gained the trust of Mr Clarke by using a strategy who would become one of the cornerstones of English-Tahitian relations:

²⁴⁶ According to Robertson, Jonathan was the first Tahitian ever to receive a European name.

²⁴⁷ Robertson, p. 187.

²⁴⁸ Possibly Charles Clerke.

²⁴⁹ Robertson, p. 188.

²⁵⁰ Robertson, p. 188.

“He made signs to poor Growel²⁵¹ who was still on the fret that he would bring him a fine young Girl to sleep with him, this Merry thought of the Chief put an end to growling and pleasd the freter, who was pleasd to say well done Jonathan if you perform your promis you shall be rewarded”²⁵²

Later, the officers used the same strategy back, by showing Jonathan a picture of a British woman:

“We made him understand that this was the picture of the women in our country and if he went with us he should have one of them always to Sleep with, this put him such raptures of Joy that’s its imposible for me to describe he hugd the picture in his breast and kist it twenty times, and made several oyther odd motions, to show us how happy he would be with so fine a woman.”²⁵³

By the end of the evening Robertson summed up his impression of his new Tahitian friend:

“We all supposed Jonathan to be one of the first rank people of the Island, from the respect that the rest showd him, but had he been King of this and all the high Mountain to the Southward, let them reach or Extend ever so far even to the Dutch Spice Islands I am certain Jonathan would have made this Young Lady Queen”²⁵⁴

What can Robertson’s account of this dinner party tell us about the British appreciation of the newly-discovered Tahitians? First of all, Robertson’s retelling of Jonathan’s evening on board is reminiscent of parents tutoring a child. As Jonathan inspects the ship he constantly fidgets with the new objects he discovers, and he has problems behaving properly at the dinner table. Only by careful manipulation and by giving incentives do the officers help Jonathan survive a day onboard a modern ship without too much trouble. It is revealing that after seeing Jonathan stumble charmingly through an evening of British etiquette, Robertson concluded that he must belong to the finest ranks of people among his countrymen. The Savage – in Robertson’s eyes – was a simple and gentle man, who had few traces of viciousness in him, and who could be easily manipulated.

The evening with Jonathan also illustrates how the sex trade had already begun to become a part of British-Tahitian relations at this early stage. Jonathan had seen how easily persuaded the English seamen could be when faced with the prospect of a beautiful local girl. The fact that Jonathan was promised an English woman in return is more unusual.

²⁵¹ Probably a nickname given to Mr. Clarke for the time being, derived from the word “growl”.

²⁵² Robertson, p. 188.

²⁵³ Robertson, p. 189.

²⁵⁴ Robertson, p. 189.

The French navigator Lous-Antoine de Bougainville was not only taken in by Tahitian sexuality, but also made several observations of the Tahitian character in his influential account:

“The character of the nation has appeared mild and beneficent to us. Though the isle is divided into many little districts, each of which has its own matter, yet there does not seem to be any civil war, or any private hatred in the isle. It is probable, that the people of Tahiti deal amongst each other with unquestioned sincerity.”²⁵⁵

Not surprisingly, considering Bougainville’s fascination with the more pleasurable sides of Tahitian life, he connected his description of the Tahitian character to their paradisiacal existence:

“Thus accustomed to live continually immersed in pleasure, the people of Taiti have acquired a witty and humourous temper, which is the offspring of ease and of joy. They likewise contracted from the same sources a character of fickleness, which constantly amazed us. Every thing strikes them, yet nothing fixes their attention; amidst all the new objects, which we presented to them, we could never succeed in making them attend for two minutes together to any one.”²⁵⁶

Bougainville’s undervaluation of the mental capacities of the Tahitians was only the beginning of many similar statements made by individuals who claimed to love and admire the islanders. It is one of the great and interesting paradoxes of early European-Tahitian relations that European visitors could on the one hand portray Tahiti as heaven on earth, and on the other hand make extremely derogatory remarks (who would today be considered racist) about the inhabitants, for example Bougainville’s assertion that “it seems as if the least reflection is a toilsome labour for them, and that they are still more averse to the exercises of the mind, than to those of the body”.²⁵⁷ Still, Bougainville did not deny that the islanders were in possession of certain capabilities. Like many others he admired – with reservation - the production and utilisation of the tools the islanders did in fact use:

“Their skill and ingenuity in the few necessary instances of industry, which notwithstanding the abundance of the country, and the temperature of the climate they cannot dispense with, would be sufficient to destroy such assertion.”²⁵⁸

²⁵⁵ Bougainville, p. 252.

²⁵⁶ Bougainville, p. 258.

²⁵⁷ Bougainville, p. 258.

²⁵⁸ Bougainville, p. 258.

Undoubtedly, it was not the character and abilities of the Tahitians, but Bougainville's vision of a fantasy realm that made him bid farewell to the island by describing it as "a friend, whom we must love with all his faults."²⁵⁹

The voyages of James Cook produced many opinions on the character of the Tahitians. Arriving for the first time in 1769, Cook himself was not a man willing to go into lengthy evaluations of the natives he encountered, he was too busy carrying out the voyage as smoothly as possible. As a captain, he was the one most bothered and worried by the constant thieving, something which might darken his view of the islanders. However, he admitted that "their behaviour to strangers and to each other is open affable and courteous and from all I could see free from treachery, only that they are thieves to a Man", and added that "the only disagreeable thing about them is the oyle which they anoint their heads."²⁶⁰

Cook's accompanying naturalist Joseph Banks was also reserved when evaluating the Tahitian character. However, he noted that "they are often very inquisitive about our families, and remember anything that is told them very well."²⁶¹ Also, he highly admired the cleanliness of the islanders: "They are certainly as cleanly a people as any under the sun; they all wash their whole bodies in running water as soon as they rise in the morning, at noon and before they sleep at night." This cleanliness would be noted and appreciated by many visitors in the following years.

Evaluations of the Tahitian character does not abound in the journals of Cook's first voyage. Artist Sydney Parkinson swiftly summed the islanders up as being "a timorous, merry, facetious, hospitable people".²⁶² But the arrival of the *Resolution* and the *Adventure* in 1772 brought inquisitive and scholarly individuals such as the Forsters and Anders Sparrman. Sparrman's journal contains many reflections on the Tahitian character; his first impression was that the islanders seemed "well made and appeared a gentle and happy race".²⁶³ After spending some time at the island and seeing the "chiefs let their fingernails grow in the manner of the rich Chinese, until they are half an inch long, a proof that they imagine idleness to be happiness and that they are exempt from the necessity of manual labour,"²⁶⁴ Sparrman made an interesting observation of how the Tahitian way of life affected the character of the

²⁵⁹ Bougainville, p. 274.

²⁶⁰ Cook, *Endeavour*, p. 124.

²⁶¹ Banks, p. 101.

²⁶² Parkinson, p. 22.

²⁶³ Sparrman, p. 49.

²⁶⁴ Sparrman, p. 58.

islanders, in that “they cannot escape the penalties of melancholia and ennui, a lack of bodily and mental energy which are the inevitable and invariable accompaniments of idleness.”²⁶⁵

Rarely did English visitors describe any visible signs of the initial violent encounter between the *Dolphin* crew and the islanders, but Sparrman chose to do so, and in the process made revealing use of the term *conqueror*:

“Among the natives we encountered were some who bore scars or lacked fingers, as reminders of the fight; others mourned relatives killed in the fray, and among them was one woman who had lost her husband and two sons. This woman, nevertheless, brought to the English tents two hogs which she presented to the conquerors, refusing to take anything in exchange. This attitude showed not only the veneration which was shown to the conquerors, but also their complete lack of any desire for revenge, which is one of the most laudable characteristics of the Otaheitans.”²⁶⁶

Sparrman was obviously impressed with several aspects of the Tahitian character and felt sympathetic to their suffering as a result of European gunfire, but he also saw Wallis’s discovery as the beginning of a conquest. The island of Tahiti being subjugated to the British Empire was never the intention of the Cook voyages, and Sparrman’s remark remains only as an assumption; that the presence of Europeans at Tahiti was in itself a sign of European supremacy.

In general, Sparrman felt the Tahitians “merit the reputation they have acquired of being a hospitable and sociable people”.²⁶⁷ Second Lieutenant James Burney concurred with Sparrman’s praise, adding that “hospitality & a love of society reigns through all these Islands; I never in any of my Rambles met with an unwelcome reception – In short they are a friendly humane people.”²⁶⁸

George Forster’s views on Tahitian savages compared to Europeans have already been noted. But his journal contains further elaborations on the nature of the Tahitian character, from the moment he went ashore for the first time and noted down the “mild features” and “pleasing countenance” of the inhabitants.²⁶⁹ It did not take long for Forster to pin down the essence of the Tahitians, namely “their peculiar gentleness of disposition, which is their general characteristic, immediately manifested itself in all their looks and actions, and gave full employment to those, who made the human heart their study.”²⁷⁰ As discussed in Chapter

²⁶⁵ Sparrman, p. 58.

²⁶⁶ Sparrman, p. 71.

²⁶⁷ Sparrman, p. 124.

²⁶⁸ Burney, p. 67.

²⁶⁹ G. Forster, p. 144.

²⁷⁰ G. Forster, p. 145.

4, many visitors to the island complained about the constant thieving on part of the islanders, but Forster stood his ground. He pointed to the fact that the islanders had been allowed to board the English ships to help steer them to safe waters during stormy weather, without anything being stolen:

“If they had had the least spark of a treacherous disposition, they could not have found a better opportunity of distressing us; but they approved themselves good-natured, and friendly in this, as on all other occasions.”²⁷¹

However, as noted earlier, the higher George Forster’s expectations to the islanders the greater was his disappointment when these expectations were not met. Of all his disappointments the one that made Forster express his grief most strongly was his meeting with an *aree* of a Tahitian district. Forster was shocked at the sight of this overweight man being fed by a woman:

“His countenance was the picture of phlegmatic insensibility, and seemed to witness that all his thoughts centred in the care of his paunch. He scarce deigned to look at us, and a few monosyllables which he uttered, were only directed to remind his feeders of their duty, when we attracted their attention.”²⁷²

Not only did the man’s appearance - “and the reflections which naturally rose from thence”²⁷³ - ruin Forster’s pleasant walk in the countryside, it also made him question everything he had believed about the paradise he had discovered:

“We had flattered ourselves with the pleasing fancy of having found at least one little spot of the world, where a whole nation, without being lawless barbarians, aimed at a certain frugal equality in their way of living, and whose hours of enjoyment were justly proportioned to those of labour and rest. Our disappointment was therefor very great, when we saw a luxurious individual spending his life in the most sluggish inactivity, and without one benefit to society, like the privileged parasites of more civilized climates, fattening on the superfluous produce of the soil, of which he robbed the labouring multitude.”²⁷⁴

One could be surprised that Forster let the fundament of his vision of Tahiti crumble at the sight of one fat individual. But the clue lies in the last sentence of above quote. On his walk, George Forster was abruptly faced with something that reminded him all too much of Europe; in this case the decadent and voluptuous members of the high nobility, which Forster apparently cared little for.

²⁷¹ G. Forster, p. 147.

²⁷² G. Forster, p. 164.

²⁷³ G. Forster, pp. 164-165.

²⁷⁴ G. Forster, pp. 164-165.

Later evaluations of the Tahitian character ranged from praise to ridicule. George Hamilton of the *Pandora* had an experience that made him particularly highlight the importance of friendship among the islanders, during the search for the *Bounty* mutineers:

“The force of friendship amongst those good creatures, will be more fully understood from the following circumstance: Churchill the principal ringleader of the mutineers, on his landing, became the Tyo, or friend, of a great chief in the upper districts. Some time after the chief happening to die without issue, his title and estate, agreeable to their law from Tyoship, devolved on Churchill, who having some dispute with one Thomson of the Bounty, was shot by him. The natives immediately rose, and revenged the death of Churchill their chief, by killing Thomson, whose skull was afterwards shown to us, which bore evident marks of fracture.”²⁷⁵

The brutality shown by the “good creatures” in this case was not dwelled upon by Hamilton, something that might have angered George Tobin, who accompanied William Bligh on his second breadfruit voyage with the *Providence* and the *Assistance*. Tobin shared little of his predecessors’ romantic views of the island and its inhabitants. He was more fascinated by their mental abilities, which he considered to be weak. At one point during their stay, a woman bearing the child of one of the mutineers came onboard. At learning the news of the possible execution of the father of her child, she reacted with so little concern, that Tobin felt his mistrust of the Tahitians was justified: “So little does serious reflection intrude on their thoughtless dispositions. An O’tahytean may be tenderly affected for a short period but it would appear that, no circumstance whatsoever, is capable of fixing a lasting impression on their mind.”²⁷⁶

Later, Tobin got the chance to ridicule King Pomare himself, during a dinner with Bligh and the officers. Reminiscent of Forster’s description of the pathetic *aree*, Tobin was more amused than shocked, mocking the most powerful man at Tahiti:

“Dining with Captain Bligh I found Pomaurey of the party who never contaminates his hands with the touch of food, but is crammed like a Turkey by one of his attendants, nor is it possible to consider anything more ludicrous than this operation. He received several glasses of wine from me, which I was instructed to pour down his eager throat as he sat with his hands totally unemployed. [He had] an awkward stoop, with a vacant unmeaning countenance, in which indolence and good nature were leading features.”²⁷⁷

Despite comments by sceptics such as Tobin, the romanticists were the major driving force behind the effort to define the Tahitian character. George Vancouver, who steered his

²⁷⁵ Hamilton, p. 40.

²⁷⁶ Oliver, p. 165.

²⁷⁷ Oliver, p. 82.

Discovery and *Chatham* to the Pacific in the 1790's, leaned towards the romantic school of thought. He was delighted by the Tahitian character:

“The suffusions of joy, and a readiness to oblige, were evident in the countenances of all whom we met. Their instant compliance with all our requests, and their eagerness to be foremost in performing any little friendly office, could not be observed without the most grateful emotions.”²⁷⁸

Vancouver was particularly impressed by an incident where the old Pomare visited the young Pomare (the current regent) and his brothers. Vancouver observed with great admiration “the affectionate regard with which the three sons embraced their aged and venerable father; who, in acknowledging a grateful sense of their dutiful congratulations, exhibited feelings which drew tears from the whole party.”²⁷⁹ To Vancouver, these scenes were signs of a humaneness that would have “done credit to the sensibility of the most polished nations”.²⁸⁰

At their arrival at Tahiti in 1797, the missionaries were not as impressed by the physical beauty of the Tahitians as they thought they would be. However, “the cheerfulness, good nature, and generosity of these kind people soon removed the momentous prejudices.”²⁸¹ The missionaries had also received a warning that they should be wary of forming friendships with the Tahitians “who, they hear, have formed the design of rushing upon them and taking all away”.²⁸² But yet again, the character of the Tahitians removed these worries from the minds of the missionaries: “For such suspicions there does not appear the shadow of fear; nothing can be more peaceful, kind, and submissive, than the natives, assisting them readily in all their preparations.”²⁸³

In their quest to install Christianity at Tahiti, the missionaries would necessarily have to deal with the most powerful men on the island, this being Pomare I (often referred to as “Otoo”), and the young Pomare II. The old Pomare had recently abdicated in favour of his son, who now ruled under his father’s guidance. Thus it was particularly important for the missionaries to secure friendly connections with the old Pomare, and they were “surprised to see so stout a man, perhaps the largest in the whole island, fed like a cuckoo.”²⁸⁴ Indeed, the old man was not always portrayed in positive terms by the missionaries, as he could show a stubborn resistance to Western and Christian ways. During a dinner with the two Pomares, a

²⁷⁸ Vancouver, p. 396.

²⁷⁹ Vancouver, p. 404.

²⁸⁰ Vancouver, p. 404.

²⁸¹ Wilson, p. 56.

²⁸² Wilson, p. 74.

²⁸³ Wilson, p. 74.

²⁸⁴ Wilson, p. 75.

missionary named Jefferson addressed Pomare I concerning the education of his children, including the current king, “representing it as a matter of the greatest importance both to them and the people of Otaheite; and that he would be highly blameable to neglect the opportunity which their coming afforded.”²⁸⁵ The young Pomare seemed willing to learn of European ways, but his father responded that “he did not want to Learn English”,²⁸⁶ which led Mr. Jefferson to express to the other missionaries that he had “a very bad opinion of Otoo”.²⁸⁷ However, the Wilson journal maintains its optimism and faith in the convincing power of all things European: “(...) certainly appearances are much against him; however, we may reasonably hope, that the example of our people, and the exhibition of arts which must appear wonderful in their eyes, may in time excite in his mind a thirst after knowledge”.²⁸⁸

The Wilson journal describes the early attempts at converting the islanders as promising:

“From the little experience they had gained of the people, they supposed them teachable; and though rooted in the traditions and prejudices of their ancestors, they hoped that knowledge of the language, and perseverance in their duty, would have a great effect upon the rising generation.”²⁸⁹

But it did not take long for the missionaries to realize they were facing a difficult challenge. In addition to the many sinful habits and traditions on the island, the missionaries were frustrated by the islanders’ lack of commitment and interest in the new religion. A note in the Wilson journal reads: “This day we thrice addressed the natives by our interpreter, and with their usual attention; but as soon as they retired, they fell, like children, to their own light amusements. The Lord grant the seed sown, may take firmer root in their hearts!”²⁹⁰

The missionaries’ view of the Tahitian character is perhaps better illustrated by a story found in the Wilson journal, a story so peculiar it constitutes one of the strangest passages in all of the European journals. During their stay at the island, a fact was reported to the missionaries, “which if true, was shocking. In one of Captain Cook’s visits he left a great monkey, who was made a Chief at Attahooroo;²⁹¹ he had a wife and thirty servants, and abundance of every thing: they called him Taata ooree harrai, the great man dog.”²⁹² Despite

²⁸⁵ Wilson, pp. 77-78.

²⁸⁶ Wilson, p. 78.

²⁸⁷ Wilson, p. 78.

²⁸⁸ Wilson, p. 78.

²⁸⁹ Wilson, p. 149.

²⁹⁰ Wilson, p. 157.

²⁹¹ A district.

²⁹² Wilson, p. 172.

their shock and disgust, the missionaries were apparently able to believe that a monkey could rule the the populace of a Tahitian district. According to the story, it was only when the monkey broke a Tahitian taboo that its authority was challenged:

“One day the woman seeing him catch the flies and eat them, which they abominate, she ran away into the mountains; the monkey and his toutous²⁹³ pursued, but being met by Temârre²⁹⁴, who was jelaous of his authority, he knocked him down with a club, and killed him.”²⁹⁵

What should we make of this story? It is mysterious; none of the journals from the Cook voyages ever mentions a monkey being set free on the island, nor do they report the monkey’s rise to power. Its single mention remains in the Wilson journal, and we can only presume that the story is false. However, it does tell us something about the missionaries’ perception of the people at Tahiti. So low had the islanders sunk in the missionaries’ eyes, that such a yarn as this monkey story was not dismissed as bogus but rather considered a possibility, although shocking. Implicit in the idea that the islanders could be ruled by a monkey king is the assumption that the Tahitians were a sub-species of the human race, making conversion to Christianity a particularly great challenge.

After the many harsh condemnations contained in the Wilson journal, it is suprising to find a paragraph in the appendixes praising the Tahitians. Both the date and the author of the paragraph is unknown, but it is a rare example of a missionary appreciating the Tahitian character, in stark contrast with the larger part of the Wilson journal:

“Their manners are affable and engaging; their step easy, firm, and graceful; their behaviour free and unguarded; always boundless in generosity to each other, and to strangers; their temples mild, gentle, and unaffected; slow to take offence, easily pacified, and seldom retaining resentment or revenge, whatever provocation they may have received.”²⁹⁶

To search for the European perceptions of the Tahitian character, it could be useful to look closer at the reactions to two particular Tahitians - Omai and Aotourou – the first Tahitian visitors to Europe.

²⁹³ Servants.

²⁹⁴ An *aree* – a chief.

²⁹⁵ Wilson, p. 172.

²⁹⁶ Wilson, p. 327.

Omai and Aotourou – discoverers of Europe

Not only did Europeans discover Tahiti in 1767, it did not take long before the first Tahitian set foot on European soil. This was Aotourou, brought to France by Louis Antoine de Bougainville in 1769. In 1775 James Cook copied Bougainville and brought back the Tahitian native Omai to London after the second circumnavigation. The fate of these two Tahitian explorers could be seen as test cases; how well would a Tahitian fare when removed from his harmonious island and placed in an increasingly modern Europe? The results could reveal a lot about the character of the Tahitians and whether they were lost causes or people who could be “civilized”. Both Aotourou and Omai were given freedom to roam about as they chose, and both became famous, exotic beings from a newly discovered island as they were. The reactions to their European visit constitutes another aspect of the image of Tahiti.

If we are to prove or disprove a belief in “noble savages,” we must also look at the fates of Aotourou and Omai in light of this concept. Could their behaviour in Europe serve as examples of noble “children of nature” removed from their natural habitat?

We know much more about the fate of Omai than that of Aotourou. The little information we have on Aotourou derives primarily from Bougainville’s journal, recounting some of the Tahitian’s experiences in Paris. The impression of Aotourou in France was that of a stupid creature from a land far away. He seemed a slow learner, and after two years in France he could only speak a few words of French.²⁹⁷ Bougainville’s defense of Aotourou against French critics is revealing. According to Bougainville, the reason for Aotourou’s lack of language skills was partly based on a speech defect and partly on the fact that he was - after all - only a Tahitian, whose “memory had never been exercised by any kind of study, *nor had his mind ever been at work*”.²⁹⁸ Thus Bougainville did his best to defend Aotourou on the grounds that the people of Tahiti lacked the mental capacity to learn even the most basic words or concepts, and therefore Aotourou was not to blame for not speaking French. Today it would be seen as blatant racism, but in the 1770’s it was an honest attempt to explain and justify the difference between “us” and “them”. It was also a critique of the high-browed attitudes of European intellectuals. After all, *they* would have no problems in learning a European language, their minds having been trained in the arts and sciences from a young age.

²⁹⁷ Bougainville, pp. 263-264.

²⁹⁸ Bougainville, p. 264. (My italics).

“The Taihi-man, on the contrary, only having a small number of ideas, relative on the one hand to a most simple and most limited society, and on the other, to wants which we are reduced to the smallest number possible; he would have been obliged, first of all, as I may say, to create a world of previous ideas, in a mind which is as indolent as his body, before he could come so far as to adapt to them the words in our language, by which they are expressed.”²⁹⁹

Johann Reinhold Forster, who translated Bougainville’s *Voyage* into English and who usually described the Tahitians in as favourable terms as possible, may have been baffled by Bougainville’s “defense” and added a footnote in his translation explaining that Aotourou was by no means a typical Tahitian. Even among his own countrymen he was seen as “one of the most stupid of fellows”.³⁰⁰

The first Tahitian visitor to England was much discussed by the British voyagers and is often mentioned in the journals. Like his French counterpart, Omai became something of a celebrity in England – a living curiosity from an exotic island.³⁰¹ A common theme in the navigators’ journals is the notion that Omai was not suited to represent his countrymen abroad. “The Man was by no means a sample of the Country, either in figure, complexion, rank, or connection,”³⁰² as John Elliott put it. Most of all, it was Omai’s physical appearance that did not serve as a good example of the reknown Tahitian beauty. If Aotourou was the stupid one, Omai was the Ugly Duckling. George Forster, perhaps embarrassed that his dear Tahitians were represented by Omai, bluntly asserted that “among all the inhabitants of Taheitee and the Society Isles, we have seen few individuals so ill-favoured as himself.”³⁰³

Most agreed that Omai was ugly, but his character was another matter. His actions and manners were under close scrutiny. What was he capable of, and could he be seen as a typical Tahitian, apart from his lack of beauty? George Forster thought so:

“The qualities of his heart and head resembled those of his countrymen in general; he was not an extraordinary genius like Tupaia, but he was warm in his affections, grateful, and humane; he was polite, intelligent, lively, and volatile.”³⁰⁴

However, Forster was confused about Omai’s desire to go to war against Bora-Bora when returning to the Society Islands³⁰⁵. Such aggression did not fit well with Forster’s romantic perceptions of the islanders:

²⁹⁹ Bougainville, p. 264-265.

³⁰⁰ Bougainville, p. 265 (footnote).

³⁰¹ Michael Alexander, *Omai 'Noble Savage'* (London: Collins & Harvil Press, 1977), p. 69-70.

³⁰² Elliott, p. 19.

³⁰³ G. Forster, p. 211.

³⁰⁴ G. Forster, p. 211.

“We were at loss to conceive the motives which could have induced a native of one of these islands to become a conqueror. If we believed the accounts of the Borabora men, their native island was as fertile and desirable as these of which they had taken possession, therefore nothing but a spirit of ambition could have stimulated them to contentions. Such a spirit ill agreed with the simplicity and generous character of the people, and it gave us pain to be convinced, that great imperfections cannot be excluded from the best of human societies.”³⁰⁶

Forster was disappointed, as so often when Tahitians did not live up to his expectations. Another disappointment was Omai’s failure to acquire European skills and knowledge that would benefit his Tahitian countrymen upon his return. Forster also felt Omai had not received enough European goods and articles for this purpose. This view was one of many issues that made William Wales sharply criticize Forster in his *Remarks on Mr. Forster’s Account*, which started a highly polemical debate between Forster and Wales in the wake of the publication of Forster’s *A Voyage Round the World* in 1777. To Wales, supplying Omai (and Tahitians in general) with European tools and knowledge would have been a waste of time:

“He was not, indeed, furnished with a profusion of articles for which he had not the least inclination, or which none but the merest speculative reasoner in nature could suppose would be of use to the people to whom he was returning. And for similar reasons, it was thought unnecessary to tease him, by endeavouring to fill his mind with a knowledge of our agriculture, arts, and manufactures, which are by no means so well adapted to that climate as their own (...) and which could answer no other purpose than to gratify our curiosity, in observing the clumsy manner in which they would finish them.”³⁰⁷

To Wales, Primitive Man was a lost cause, and it was better to let him live his simple life than to push modern ideas and skills on him. Wales’ critique of Forster’s unreasonable expectations was also an attack on romanticism, an effort to convince his contemporaries to return to reality:

“But farther, if we consider that it is the work of many years of a man’s life to make himself master but one single art or manufacture, even when assisted by all the rest, and also by all the skill and experience which former ages have been accumulating; that a language was to be learned whereby all this was to be communicated, and even a new set of ideas created; I say, if Dr. Forster, and some others, who have been pleased to express themselves very freely on this head, had but considered all of this, and that poor Omai, with a body never inured to labour, a mind little used to reason, or to extend itself to objects beyond the present moment, was to compass of a year or two, and afterwards put them into practice under so many disadvantages, and amongst a people who, because they could not possibly foresee their use, would rather deride than assist him, they would

³⁰⁵ Omai had personal grudges against the Bora-borans.

³⁰⁶ G. Forster, p. 213.

³⁰⁷ G. Forster, p. 706.

surely have expressed themselves with a little more diffidence and less asperity than they have done.”³⁰⁸

Besides, what use was it to teach Omai knowledge and principles that still had not been perfected among Europeans?

“(…)who, though they have them continually in their mouths, are at the same time endeavouring, as much as in them lies, to hack to pieces, and ruin the reputation of their neighbour; and are trying, by every piece of artful chicanery, to undermine his property.”³⁰⁹

Thus Wales managed to dismiss the Tahitians as primitive beings, criticize his contemporary intellectuals for getting hopelessly lost in a romantic dreamworld, and lastly to launch a personal attack on George Forster, whom he felt had made injurious comments both about Wales and others accompanying James Cook on his second voyage³¹⁰ (although Wales assumed – at least ostensibly - that *A Voyage around the World* must have been written by George’s father, Johann Reinhold, another embarrassing allegation for George to cope with).

Forster was shocked. Just like Wales’ allegations had been, Forster’s points of defense were many. On the issue of Omai, he was astonished at Wales’ cynical perspective:

“If Mr. Wales cannot comprehend, that Omai during his stay in this country could have more usefully employed his time than at court, at the play, pantheon, taverns, and other scenes of dissipation, an attempt to enlighten his intellects and mend his morals may prove very unsuccessful.”³¹¹

Not only that, for was not Wales’ scepticism a blow to the universalism of those very principles and ideas that Wales himself valued so greatly? Forster cunningly asked the question with reference to Omai:

“When Mr. Wales thinks it *reasonable*, that a man with a good heart, such as O-Mai really was possessed of, after being *taught* to form a rational idea of virtue, to comprehend the importance of religion, and to believe its divine origin, may forget these glorious truths again, and never think of them after he had left us; will not every virtuous reader think it *reasonable* too, that its doctrine, which places in a contemptible light, all that is sacred and respectable amongst men, most unneringly betrays its secret author.”³¹²

³⁰⁸ G. Forster, p. 706.

³⁰⁹ G. Forster, p. 706.

³¹⁰ G. Forster, p. 699.

³¹¹ G. Forster, p. 764.

³¹² G. Forster, pp. 764-765.

Both William Wales and George Forster were firm believers in the enlightened ideas of progress, but their views of the “primitive world” were very different. To Wales, attempting to impose Western ideas and principles on the inhabitants of Tahiti was not much more than a joke. To Forster, the effort to lift all of mankind to the heights of Enlightened Europe was a goal of the utmost importance, and few places were better suited for the purpose than Tahiti. The first step was to lessen the islanders’ workload by introducing modern tools and organizing labor after a European model:

“The more their labour is abridged, the more time remains for reflection, and for the improval of social and moral felicity. O-Mai might have been taught to fabricate iron into tools, to make pots and other vessels of clay, to prepare from cotton, and from grass, more lasting garments than the bark of a tree, and to improve the knowledge of agriculture among his countrymen. A shipload of raw materials would not only have served him, but made happy many generations of Taheitians, particularly if hints had been given him to search for some of these articles, such as iron, clay, and cotton in his own country. It is next to a certainty, that the chiefs of the country will strip him of all his riches, the moment after Captain Cook is sailed from thence; he then returns to his first insignificance; whereas, had he been taught a trade, his knowledge would always have been real riches to him, and paved road to honour and opulence among his countrymen.”³¹³

Aotourou and Omai do not seem to have left an impression of possessing particularly admirable qualities, as one might expect from “noble savages” (had such a phenomenon existed). Instead of being idealized as mythic figures, the two islanders were expected to learn European skills and knowledge. Aotourou failed at even learning French, while Omai - who did learn to speak English - still disappointed romanticists like George Forster at his failure of learning skills that could be extremely useful at Tahiti, while adding fuel to the fire for sceptics like William Wales, who saw the primitive Tahitians as lost causes, not worth the effort.

Conclusion

Although comparisons with their own homeland were implicit in the sceptics’ critique of Tahiti and the Society Islands, the romanticists were the ones who most actively engaged in these comparisons. One of their goals was to show that the life of the friendly savages of Tahiti was superior to life in modern Europe, or at least a viable alternative. Within this lay the romantic longing for a pre-modern world of simple humaneness and happiness, an urge to free oneself from a Europe quickly charging into the modern era. Here we may come close to

³¹³ G. Forster, p. 765.

the idea that has been termed “the noble savage”. As I have argued, the use of this term can be more confusing than clarifying, and it was never used by the navigators. But many of them did indeed bring with them a wish to discover something different and better than life in Europe, and were convinced they had found it at Tahiti, an island where humaneness, friendliness and morals was woven into the fabric of life.

The character of the people inhabiting this pre-modern paradise was often described with words like “gentle”, “humane”, “happy”, “simple”, “affectionate” and “caring of their family”. The islanders were also seen as well-behaving children lacking the mental capabilities of their “parents”, in this case the Europeans. Even romanticists who praised all aspects of Tahitian life made derogatory comments about the islanders’ ability to reason. The islanders were also described as lazy, and the often overweight *arees* lacked the respect from the navigators that their royal counterparts in Europe received. This demonstrates how the romantic expectations were not always met, and how the perceptions of the “children of nature” was not entirely positive. True, the European ideas of these children of nature have many similarities with what the noble savage myth is said to contain, but the islanders were also seen as stupid and lazy, characteristics which hardly fit into a glorification of savage life. The fates of Omai and Aotourou illustrate this fact. As “specimens” of Tahiti, they were not glorified as noble savages, but expected to improve themselves with European knowledge and skills. Seen as “stupid” and “ugly” respectively, Omai and Aotorou did not live up to these expectations.

7. Conclusion

Like navigators of the Pacific Ocean we have manoeuvred through various themes and opinions found in the journals of visitors to Tahiti, trying to identify the European - primarily British - perceptions of the island and its inhabitants. In a sea of ambiguities and conflicting opinions we have tried to present as clear a picture as possible of how the European visitors to Tahiti interpreted their encounters with the native population.

The women of Tahiti constituted a significant part of the image of Tahiti, contributing to myths of free love and otherworldly beauty. The fact that the sexual promiscuousness of the women was most certainly a conscious tactic used by the islanders after the initial violent encounter with the *Dolphin* crew was not realized by Louis Antoine de Bougainville – the founder of the erotic aspect of the image of Tahiti – or any of his romanticist followers. The women of Tahiti continued to be seen as nymphs without personalities or minds of their own. Also contributing to the romantic image of Tahiti was the island's beautiful physical appearance and its bountiful natural resources – the easily accessible breadfruit in particular - which added to the image of the island as an “Eden” of the Pacific.

Despite Tahiti's reputation as a realm of beauty, love and happiness, there existed several aspects of Tahitian society that were potentially disruptive elements to the harmonious image of the island. The Europeans reported that the islanders could be violent and wage war against other islands, conflicting with the idea of the peaceful and friendly primitives. Most dramatic were the reports of human sacrifice and infanticide being carried out on the island. However, these “uncivilized” customs were nowhere nearly as much discussed among the Europeans as the skills of the Tahitians as thieves; the English captains would constantly have to deal with islanders pilfering their supplies and equipment, and figure out how to solve the problem without punishing the islanders too hard and losing their goodwill.

Less reported and discussed were the intricacies of Tahitian religion and organisation of society. The Europeans were too involved in either praising the romantic sides of Tahitian life or criticizing the islanders based on ideas of evolutionary superiority (discussed below).

As discussed throughout this thesis, the Europeans had several preconceived notions formed in their minds when they visited Tahiti. These notions could be derived from earlier reports from the island or from a general wish to view exotic peoples in a particular way. Both the romanticists and sceptics brought with them expectations that lay the foundation for either disappointments or satisfying acknowledgements of ideas already in the minds of the

individual visitors. The romanticists had since Wallis's discovery and the publication of Bougainville's account contributed to the erotic image of Tahiti, but without giving entirely in to it. Regarding the sexual aspect of Tahiti, all the European visitors were drawn between the alluring idea of a paradise island of free love and their own upbringing in European countries where sex was talked about more freely than before, but not entirely without feelings of shame and degradation.

The reports of the natural beauty and easily accessible resources of Tahiti fit well with European expectations of a Pacific paradise. However, the fact that the Tahitians did not capitalize on the fertile soil and the potential for extensive agriculture on their island was grounds for disappointment among those who wished Tahiti to take part in the progress of all nations, and a reason for the sceptics to dismiss Tahiti as another example of the backwardness of non-European peoples.

There were several other sources for disappointment based on the preconceived notions of the European visitors. Once the idea of the happy and peaceful Tahitian had been established, the Europeans - primarily the romanticists - had the difficult challenge of dealing with negative aspects of Tahitian life, as mentioned above; the dark side of Tahiti was not easily compatible with romantic dreams of a Pacific Eden. As a result, the romanticists would often gloss over these troublesome phenomena and rather focus on the more enjoyable and positive sides of Tahiti. Both the romanticists and sceptics neglected the universalism of their moral outlooks as they judged these negative features of the islanders different from how they judged their own countrymen; the romanticists by looking away when they were faced with immoral acts by European standards, the sceptics by using these acts as proof of the savage and uncivilized state of the island.

These preconceived notions also came to play when the Europeans tried to comprehend both Tahitian religious beliefs and societal structure, which were inextricably linked. After leaving behind an increasingly modern and secularized Europe and arriving at the seemingly primitive island of Tahiti, the navigators were not inclined to comprehend Tahitian religion, and their effort to analyze the islanders' way of organising their society stranded after attempts at placing Tahitian society into Western models of government.

The abundant comparisons between Europe and Tahiti found in the journals are further indicators that many of the Europeans brought with them ideas and dreams they were hoping Tahiti would fulfill, often including a quest to prove that non-European and "uncivilized" peoples were in possession of qualities and a way of life that was superior to the condition of

the Western world, where humaneness and goodness were being discarded in the name of “progress”, according to the romanticists. These expectations would naturally lead to further disappointments, such as when the islanders were a bit too reminiscent of Europeans or when the Tahitian “discoverers” of Europe – Aotourou and Omai – failed to play the roles the Europeans had created for them; most commonly a wish to see them acquire European skills and knowledge that would help their nation to reach another stage on the evolutionary ladder.

As we have reached the end, what are we to make of the “noble savage” concept, a concept that Ter Ellingson has argued did not exist at the time of the discovery of Tahiti? Ellingson’s definition of the term was “a mythic personification of natural goodness by a romantic glorification of savage life”. I have argued throughout this thesis that we may find some ideas in the European journals that correlate with the idea of the noble savage. There are certainly many examples of Europeans glorifying Tahiti and its inhabitants. The island was often portrayed as a natural paradise where the islanders could live in ease and happiness, harvesting breadfruit from the trees and living in harmony with nature, an idea reminiscent of the “children of nature” which is often connected to the idea of the noble savage. The group I have termed “the romanticists” were those who most often indulged in ideas of this kind.

Regardless of the many glorifying and romantic perceptions of Tahiti there exist several opposing views which are inconsistent with the noble savage myth. The sceptics contributed their fair share to downplay the glorified elements of the image of Tahiti, but the romanticists did also acknowledge several problematic aspects of their dream island. While the romanticists were surely fascinated by the tenacious myth of Tahiti as an island of free love and uninhibited sexual relations, they hardly saw it as “noble” and struggled to come to terms with its immoral and sinful connotations.

As mentioned, the European visitors would often have to face disappointments in their dealings with the Tahitians. Several of these disappointments can also be seen as being in contradiction with the idea of the noble savage. While the islanders were at times seen as children of nature, they also made the Europeans frustrated by the Tahitian lack of interest in taking better advantage of their natural resources and their failure to adopt the spirit of progress which modern civilizations shared. In addition, there were several aspects of Tahitian life that could be seen as decidedly more “savage” than “noble”, as discussed in this thesis; the islanders could be war-like and thieves just like any other people of this earth, and also maintain traditions that were seen as barbaric by the European standards, such as human

sacrifices and infanticide. Despite attempts by the romanticists to downplay these factors, they were still a part of the image of Tahiti throughout the period.

It is also hard to detect any glorification of the Tahitians' organisation of their society or their religious beliefs. If the Europeans believed in and glorified the noble savage, one would expect them to portray Tahitian society and religion as something to be admired. Instead, they struggled to adjust the image of Tahiti to Western concepts and forms of government, while dismissing the native religion as too difficult and confusing to understand.

It is in the European desire to discover both a moral and harmonious alternative to the Western world – and in the navigators' many attempts at comparing Tahiti with Europe to prove this point - that the noble savage myth may come the closest to ringing true. Also, the quest to define the Tahitian "character" produced assessments similar to the idea of the noble savage; the Tahitians were at times seen as humane, friendly and peaceful – "noble", if you will. However, they were also portrayed as stupid and lazy, and in comparisons with Europeans they would often be seen as inferior creatures, far down on the evolutionary ladder. Such ideas clearly point forward in history, towards later social darwinism and eugenics.

The universal acceptance of the noble savage concept teaches us how we should always reassess and criticize even widely accepted terms. The fact that the term may have some truth in it does not mean it applies to the whole truth, or that it should be used carelessly as representing a common idea of a past discourse. Rather than "noble savages" the Tahitians were seen as "children of Venus", constantly referred to as happy and playful beings lacking the knowledge and mental capabilities of the "grown-ups", in this case the Western world. At the same time, these "children" were apparently under the spell of Venus - the goddess of love - elevating this small Pacific island to a unique position in world history.

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